University of Nyisists: a theatrical investigation of rural Black students' experiences of mental wellness at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

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Dedication

I dedicate this master's thesis to my mother, my pillar, my heart, and my unwavering source of strength. Through the darkest nights of my mental wellness struggles, you stood by me with a love that was patient, a presence that was constant, and a faith in me that I often could not find in myself. Your understanding surpassed words, and your support gave me the courage to carry on. I owe this journey and every page of this work to your boundless love and belief in me. You are my forever light.

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To every university student silently battling the weight of mental wellness challenges. To those who wake up to grey skies and wonder about the meaning of it all, may you find hope, healing, and the courage to keep going. You are not alone.

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Abstract

Grounded in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and framed through an applied theatre methodology, this qualitative research investigates the lived experiences of rural Black students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus, with a particular focus on mental wellness. Using critical ethnography and Augusto Boal's theatre methods, the study explores how structural, cultural, and institutional factors shape students' perceptions and expressions of mental wellness. Selected through purposive sampling, a small cohort of participants engaged in a series of theatrical workshops that served as dialogical spaces to reveal, interrogate, and reimagine their relevant experiences. The study foregrounds themes such as rural background dislocation, institutional silencing, Black Tax, curriculum mismatch, and coping mechanisms, captured in expressive constructs such as *Kuningi*. These themes emerged as culturally embedded narratives that reflect the psycho-social and emotional struggles students face in a higher education environment, often misaligned with the lived realities of their upbringing. Rather than pathologizing these experiences through Western psychiatric frameworks alone, the study highlights the importance of listening to the students' own languages, metaphors, and performative expressions as valid epistemologies of mental wellness.

This research contributes to the growing body of decolonial scholarship that calls for responsive, culturally grounded mental wellness support in South African universities. It recommends that institutions incorporate performative, grassroots-driven interventions that affirm students' identities and foster spaces for healing, dialogue, and transformation. Ultimately, the study asserts that mental wellness in higher education cannot be separated from context, culture, and creative resistance.

Keywords: rural Black students, mental wellness, university, and theatre.

Abbreviations

UKZN- University of KwaZulu-Natal
PMB- Pietermaritzburg
TIE- Theatre in Education
DIE- Drama in Education
LGBTQI- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and
Intersex PTSD- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

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Chapter 1

Introduction of the study

1.1. Introduction

Mental wellness plays an indispensable role in shaping students' academic experiences, personal development, and overall success in higher education. As VanderLind (2017:40) observes, "learning can be hindered by students' mental health," a statement that underlines the critical intersection between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement. University students do not exist in isolation from their mental wellness realities; rather, their emotional states, social contexts, and psychological burdens significantly influence how they engage with learning, relate to others, and envision their futures. Mental wellness, therefore, is not a peripheral concern but central to the quality of educational access and success.

Globally, growing attention has been given to the prevalence of mental health disorders among university students. Depression and anxiety, in particular, have been extensively documented as key barriers to academic performance. These conditions are often compounded by perfectionist tendencies, where high self-imposed expectations contribute to chronic stress, fear of failure, and diminished self-worth (VanderLind, 2017). The interaction between perfectionism, depression, and anxiety represents a triad that places students at increased risk of academic underperformance, disengagement, and in severe cases, attrition. As institutions become increasingly competitive, students are subjected to greater academic pressure, social isolation, and uncertainty about future employment, all of which exacerbate mental wellness challenges.

In the South African context, the mental wellness of university students is shaped by additional layers of complexity, particularly in relation to structural inequality, socio-economic instability, historical marginalisation, and institutional exclusion. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those from rural areas, are more likely to face academic, financial, and psychosocial stressors that undermine their mental health. These stressors include inadequate schooling preparation, poverty, family responsibilities, cultural dislocation, and systemic neglect by university support services. The burden is disproportionately felt by Black rural students, who are often the first in their families to attend university and are expected to succeed despite the numerous barriers they face. Such students are not only navigating academic demands but also the psychological toll of being positioned as the hope of their families and communities.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the mental wellness experiences of Black rural students within the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus. Using Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a theoretical lens, it investigates how these students navigate, resist, and survive within an academic institution that often marginalises their ways of knowing and being. Central to this inquiry is the recognition that mental wellness is both a personal and political matter, one that requires critical reflection, collective dialogue, and transformative action within higher education institutions.

1.2 Project title

University of Nyisists: *a theatrical investigation of rural Black students' experiences of mental wellness at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (2022/24).*

Keywords: rural Black students, mental wellness, university, and theatre.

1.2.1. Background and problem statement

The term "nyisists" became popular in the University of KwaZulu-Natal Pietermaritzburg campus in 2016/17 after the FeesMustFall movement protests. There was too much pressure in studies and second semester being extended to January 2017. Students had many submissions happening simultaneously, some missed tests and examinations because there was just too much happening at one time and it was overwhelming. It was easy to lose focus and difficult to choose which one to attend to. Moreover, students were still facing the same matters that the struggle of the FeesMustFall movement was fighting for, such as financial issues (having to figure out what to eat). They began talking and saying "kuyanyiwa" at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, meaning it is very hard and unbearable. Thereafter they changed the University of KwaZulu-Natal to calling it "The University of Nyisists, "nyisists" being the place derived from the verb "kuyanyiwa". The term is a South African township slang used to describe overwhelming circumstances. It finds relevance in this study because it addresses the very same issues that led to student's protests and which led/lead to students experiencing mental wellness problems. Students continue to experience academic and financial exclusion or are at risk of facing exclusion and students still face depression from many angles. The same issues that students raised during the protest of FeesMustFall and the post FeesMustFall issues.

As a student, since 2016 till this date, I have observed and engaged with other students on this matter of student's mental wellness around the University of KwaZulu-Natal Pietermaritzburg campus, whereby several students are visiting the student's counselling or seeking the contact details of student's counselling. This happened the most after the trend story of Khensani Maseko, who was a South African student at the Rhodes University, who committed suicide in 2018 August after being raped (Meyersfeld, 2020). Several South African students shared their experiences of the things that they have faced within the universities of which for me increased the need to do something about mental wellness.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal provides the academic monitoring support programs whereby they hire and train postgraduate students to identify students with any kind of issues within the campus spaces and refer them to relevant facilities such as student counselling. There are the College of Humanities First Year's Experiences (CHUM FYE) Wellness Mentors as well, which started at beginning of the year 2022. These are some of the steps that the university is taking to ensure that the mental wellness of students is addressed. However, despite the identified and executed research on mental wellness by the universities, the students still face the significant barriers to academic success etc., due to mental health challenges. The purpose of the study is to use the theatre tools in exploring this matter. I am not aware of an instance where theatre has been used before for the mental wellness of rural Black students' study in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in Pietermaritzburg campus. As an artist, I believe that theatre can be useful for students to explore this matter as it opens many channels of engaging the social issues and imagining the world to be different (Nicholson, 2005). It is committed in breaking down the social hierarchies and decisions (Nicholson, 2005). Applying theatre tools to mental wellness will "lead us into richer understanding of ourselves and our worldly relationship" (Ngong, 2017:2).

The research study focuses on the experiences faced by the 10 selected rural Black students as participants in relation to their university life, their access to and participation in the curriculum and mental wellness facilities, the factors and the academic performance resulted from their mental wellness state. Black students are the majority in the University of KwaZulu-Natal and reported by the campus psychologist to be the ones who are attending the university counselling services the most. The study investigates the experiences on mental wellness of the rural Black students at the university of KwaZulu-Natal (2022/24) using theatrical tools. The main question of the study is, how can theatre be used to expose the rural Black students' experiences of mental wellness at the University of KwaZulu-Natal? Pillay, Thwala & Pillay (2020) argue that rural students coming from a schooling system that is inadequate in resources or other many ways, largely as a legacy of apartheid and continuing disadvantage show to have mental wellness issues.

1.2.2. The relevance of the problem statement in a theatre context

This study finds its relevance in the pressing need to reimagine how the mental wellness of rural Black students is explored, expressed, and responded to particularly through non-clinical, culturally relevant, and decolonial methodologies. While existing university support systems such as counselling services, academic monitoring, and wellness mentorships attempt to respond to mental health needs, the continued psychological distress, dropout rates, and underperformance among rural Black students indicate that these responses are often structurally insufficient and culturally misaligned. Many students report barriers such as language, institutional formality, and rigid therapeutic protocols that alienate rather than affirm their identities and experiences.

In 2019, I was one of the students who attended the student's counselling and diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. I was dealing with personal relationship matters, family matters, spiritual matters, to mention a few. I felt like my psychologist did not fully understand what I was going through because I had to explain myself in English not my mother tongue language. I also found the office environment very uncomfortable, it looked and felt like a strictly professional space that needed me to express myself in a certain strict manner. It did not make me feel comfortable to fully express myself frankly. Instead, every time I went there, I wished for a space where I can sit down on the floor, lay down if I want to and talk, cry, sing, dance. I wished for a performative space to embody my feelings. I wished to tell my story differently, without feeling like I am following a certain protocol of questions being asked. I then kept wondering if I am the only student who was having these feelings about the university counselling services. I then saw the need of theatre as a platform for helping to understand and deal with mental wellness.

In this context, the relevance of theatre is that it offers an alternative and transformative space. Theatre, particularly when grounded in participatory and decolonial practice, allows for embodied, dialogical, and creative storytelling**,** as opposed to the structured, often medicalised approach of conventional counselling. Drawing from scholars like Nicholson (2005) and Ngong (2017), theatre is understood as a liberatory space where oppressed voices can re-narrate their experiences, challenge dominant discourses, and imagine new possibilities. It functions both as a method of inquiry and as a form of healing, enabling participants to speak, move, sing, cry, and reflect outside the constraints of formal academic or clinical settings.

The relevance of this problem in a theatre context was amplified by the researcher's own lived experience as a rural Black student who sought help, encountered alienating institutional spaces, and recognised the absence of culturally resonant mental wellness interventions. The personal becomes political here, as the researcher’s journey reflects a broader crisis of support and belonging faced by many rural Black students. This insight not only informs the rationale for the study but also guides the methodological choice to use theatre as both a research tool and a wellness intervention.

Thereafter, I visited a university psychologist regarding this study. The psychologist revealed that a significant number of students seek psychological assistance, with many presenting issues related to mental wellness, and in some cases, diagnosed mental disorders. However, the psychologist noted that most of these students attend only one or two sessions before discontinuing counselling altogether. This observation prompted several critical questions: Why do students not complete their counselling sessions? Are university psychologists reporting these dropout rates, and what actions are being taken by the institution in response? Furthermore, if interventions have been implemented, to what extent are they effective in addressing and alleviating student mental health concerns? Naidoo and Cartwright (2020) argue that Student Counselling Services in South Africa operate within a historically complex and socio-politically charged context. They assert that “the country’s apartheid legacy of racial oppression and discrimination perpetuated a wide range of political, socio-economic, and educational inequalities which continue to affect subsequent generations of Black people, including current students in need of Student Counselling Services" (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020 :2). This historical backdrop underscores the urgency and relevance of this study. Despite the existence of student counselling services on South African university campuses, their efficacy appears limited, particularly in addressing the nuanced needs of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, the relevance of theatre lies in its capacity to provide a holistic, embodied, and liberatory method of engagement with mental wellness.

1.2.3. Rationale and significance of this study

The rationale for this study is rooted in the urgent need to critically investigate and give voice to the mental wellness experiences of rural Black students within the university space, specifically at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus. It is mostly informed by the sociopolitical legacy of the *FeesMustFall* movement, which exposed not only structural inequalities in access to education but also the emotional, psychological, and mental toll exerted upon Black students. The coinage of the term *"University of Nyisists"* on the Pietermaritzburg campus after 2016 reflects students' collective expression of distress, exhaustion, and institutional abandonment.

Drawing from the researcher's personal experience as a rural Black student who has navigated these challenges and found current mental wellness resources inadequate, this study aims to disrupt the normative ways in which mental wellness support is conceptualised and delivered. It proposes the use of **theatre as an alternative, performative, and participatory methodology** that honours indigenous ways of knowing, expression, and healing. Theatre offers a space that is not confined to verbal language alone but embraces the body, emotion, song, silence, and storytelling as valid and liberatory forms of communication. It encourages collectivity, reflection, and embodied dialogue, the elements that align closely with the cultural and communal values of many rural Black students.

Considering persistent mental wellness challenges, inadequate institutional responses, and the silencing of rural voices, this study is both timely and necessary. It offers an alternative lens through which to understand student mental wellness, one that foregrounds lived experience, cultural identity, and collective storytelling. The study seeks not only to document the struggles faced by rural Black students but to contribute to the development of transformative, contextually grounded approaches to mental wellness in higher education.

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To use theatre as a tool in investigating the rural Black students' experiences on mental wellness in the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

2. To use applied theatre methodologies to reveal the relationship between what the university provides and what the students experience/need in terms of mental wellness.

3.To identify the ideal mental wellness theatre programme from the students' point of view.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How can theatre be used to expose rural Black students' experiences of mental wellness at the University of KwaZulu-Natal?

2. What might the theatre processes reveal about the relationship between what the university provides and what the students experience?

3. How could theatre be used to help students imagine a different mental wellness program for themselves?

1.5. Research site

This study was carried out at the University of KwaZulu-Natal PMB Campus which is situated at the centre of Pietermaritzburg (Capital city of KwaZulu-Natal). The University of Kwazulu-Natal strives for transformation and excellence. It has established the credentials of the research-intensive institution and became one of the leading universities in Africa and in the world. It inspires greatness. The university also argues to take a stand in supporting students' wellness as it has taken some measures in addressing the issue.

1.6. Definitions of key words

- **University:** Boulton and Lucas (2011) described the term university quoting the words of John Henry Newman in The Idea of a University in 1852 when he argued "A University is a place … whither students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge; … a place for the communication and circulation of thought, by means of personal intercourse. … It is the place to which a thousand schools make contributions; in which the intellect may safely range and speculate. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, … discoveries verified and perfected, and .. error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge. … Mutual education, in a large sense of the word, is one of the great and incessant occupations of human society. .. One generation forms another…. We must consult the living man and listen to his living voice, .. by familiar intercourse to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. Thus, is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes."

- **Rural Black students:** are individuals who identify as Black and originate from under-resourced, geographically remote areas typically characterised by limited access to quality education, infrastructure, and socio-economic opportunities. Their educational journeys are shaped by historical and structural inequalities rooted in South Africa's apartheid legacy, often resulting in academic disadvantage upon entering university.
- **Mental wellness:** Bodeker, Pecorelli, Choy, Guerra, & Karrippanon (2020) conceptualize mental wellness in terms of general sense of wellbeing in the physical, social, occupational, spiritual, financial, and environmental aspects of our lives. In addition, Restoule, Hopkins, Robinson, &Wiebe (2015) further explained that holistic understanding of mental wellness accounts for community relations and focuses on achieving balance of spirit, heart, mind, and physical being.
- **Theatre:** Theatre is described by Nicholson (2005) as a platform for making a difference and can also be an effective means of health promotion (Seguin & Rancourt, 1996).

1.7. Brief introduction of the theoretical framework

The theory that the researcher will use to draw on to inform this study as well as discussing the data is the Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire. This theory aims to analyze how the rural Black students identify themselves within the university space, their belonging and how is that impacting on their mental wellness status.

The Pedagogy of the Oppressed is essential as it helps the oppressed to fight back to regain their lost humanity through the oppressor (colonizer) and attain full humanity (Ramos, 1996). The oppressor's consciousness is that humanity is a thing that is exclusive of some (Ramos, 1996). In the dehumanisation by the oppressor, the oppressed individual become objectified through injustices, exploitation, violence, and oppression (Ramos, 1996). In this study, the rural Black students' mental wellness, by virtue of their social position as rural, Black, students in the neoliberal corporate university, is dehumanising, as their identity affected by colonial experiences within the structures of the university, which is a colonised space since the apartheid era. Even though there may be changes implemented post-apartheid, the university spaces are the spaces that still neutralise war of colonisation. Students face the colonial structures that have the impact on their daily lives within the university space which also influence their mental wellness. The entire university system being one of the colonial structures that remained after apartheid. Therefore, Black students are the oppressed, who are still at war with colonisation as historically during apartheid were not the target market for the formal universities, thus ways of engagement are designed for students of a different culture as the indigenous knowledge has not been recognised in these universities.

The Pedagogy of the Oppressed opens the space for students to fight for restoring their humanity. It is a lens through which students can recognise their history, their reality of life and critically engage on it for revolution. The students must fight the injustices of knowledge creation and production, curriculum, the injustices of language, the injustices of commodified education. Ramos (1996) does argue that no one should fight the struggle of the oppressed other then the oppressed themselves. They must understand the concept humanisation, identify the oppressor and fight for their full humanity. When they understand their own oppression and discover the oppressor, they move to a dialogue stage with others to attain the goal of humanisation (Ramos, 1996).

1.8. Briefly on research methodology and design

This study adopts a **qualitative research design**, as it seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of Black rural students regarding their mental wellness within the university context. According to Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey (2020), qualitative research is an approach that enables researchers to examine in-depth how people make sense of their experiences within their natural environments, using flexible and context-sensitive methods.

This approach is particularly relevant for this study as it prioritises subjective meaning, social context, and emotional elements that are central to understanding mental wellness. Qualitative research allows for rich, detailed narratives to emerge through open-ended inquiry, such as interviews, participatory workshops, and performance-based engagement. It also supports the exploration of unspoken or marginalised experiences, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies. In this research, the use of theatre as both a method and a space of expression aligns with the qualitative emphasis on meaning-making and participant agency. Ultimately, this design is appropriate for addressing the complex social, psychological, and cultural dynamics surrounding rural Black students' mental wellness in higher education.

1.9. Study layout

The structure of this thesis consists of five chapters which are briefly outlined below:

- **Chapter one**: This chapter introduces the study, provide the background and outline the research objectives and the questions of the study.

- **Chapter two**: This literature review chapter focuses on rural Black students, university, mental wellness and the use of theatre in the mental wellness experiences.

- **Chapter three**: This chapter discusses the theoretical contributions of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed in the study.

- **Chapter Four**: This chapter outlines the research methodology, data collection methods, sampling methods used to collect data, data collection limitations, ethical considerations, and how the data was analysed.

- **Chapter Five**: This chapter is about data presentation. The first section presents all information gathered following the primary questions as they are being asked from chapter 1. The second section offers research discussion, and the last section offers conclusion, recommendations and limitations of the study.

1.10. Summary of the chapter

Chapter One introduces the study by situating it within the growing concern over student mental wellness, both globally and within the South African higher education context. In overall, this study seeks to investigate the lived experiences of mental wellness among Black rural students, using theatrical tools as both a research method and a space of expression. It aims to challenge dominant discourses, amplify marginalised voices, and explore new ways of understanding and supporting student mental health in higher education.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The review of literature is broken up into sections that will give a broader understanding of wellness in general and then mental wellness specifically. Secondly, it looks at students' mental wellness and lastly, looking at theatre and wellness. The sections will provide both global perspectives and South African local perspectives.

2.2. Conceptualizing wellness

The assessment of the concept of wellness is important to provide useful insight into issues of mental preparedness using theatres. There have been many contributions to the concept of wellness. The definitions of the concepts might be key in understanding mental health dimensions affecting black students. Although the terms well-being and health are frequently used interchangeably, they have rather different roots. According to Schramme (2023) health is more than just the absence of illness or disability; it is the state of physical, mental, and social well-being. According to this definition, health encompasses more than just the absence of sickness; it also includes a broader range of medical viewpoints.

A definition of the term focusing on active health promotion through lifestyle change emerged in the 1950s and spawned the wellness movement in the 1970s (Presse, 2005). The term then took on additional meanings as it began to be used as a marketing tool, and as it has since become linked with certain esoteric ideas (Presse, 2005). Both Presse (2005) and Corbin & Pangrazi (2001) argue that wellness is a broadly used term that is defined in different ways by different people and ending up causing confusion. According to Corbin & Pangrazi (2001), it is important to develop a commonly acceptable definition of wellness.

Wellness is a multidimensional state of being describing the existence of positive health in an individual as exemplified by quality of life and a sense of well-being (Corbin & Pangrazi, 2001). Social, physical, and economic factors, as well as personal traits and behaviours, are all determinants of health (Schramme, 2023)). There are many types of wellness. This involves physical, emotional, social, spiritual intellectual and mental wellness.

Firstly, physical wellness is how we care for our body, mind, health, and vitality. Physical wellness presupposes a healthy body maintained by good nutrition, regular exercise, avoiding harmful habits, and informed and responsible health decisions (Zeb, Shettima, Faizefu, Gul, & Aloku, 2023). Physical wellness requires a well-balanced diet, plenty of physical activity and exercise, proper weight maintenance, sleep, avoidance of risky sexual behaviour, limited exposure to environmental contaminants, and restricted intake of harmful substances (Zeb et al., 2023).

Secondly, the emotional wellness concerns awareness and acceptance of our feelings, thoughts, attitudes, self-talk, resilience, and self-esteem (Melnyk & Neale, 2018). Emotional wellness is understanding our feelings, accepting our limitations, achieving emotional stability, and becoming comfortable with our emotions (Melnyk & Neale, 2018). It relates to the ability to express emotions appropriately, adjust to change, healthily cope with stress, and enjoy life despite occasional disappointments and frustrations (Ibid).

Thirdly, social wellness is about how we relate to ourselves, others, and the community, having supportive relationships and a sense of belonging (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015). Social Wellness is the ability to relate well to others, both within and outside the family unit. Social Wellness gives us the ease and confidence to be outgoing, friendly, and affectionate toward others. It involves concern for the individual and an interest in humanity and the environment (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015).

Fourthly, intellectual wellness is about having creative and stimulating activities that allow us to continue learning and pursuing our interests (Ciziceno, 2022). Intellectual wellness is a state in which our mind is engaged in lively interaction with the world around us. Intellectual wellness involves unrestrained inquisitiveness and enduring learning (Ciziceno, 2022). This aspect of wellness implies that one can apply what you have learned and create opportunities to learn more (Ciziceno, 2022). Through this wellness, we engage our minds in lively interaction(s) with the world around us.

Fifthly, spiritual wellness is about our sense of meaning and purpose in our lives; it is about how we integrate our beliefs and values into our actions(s) (Gorichanaz, 2022). Spiritual wellness gives us the sense that our life is meaningful and has a purpose, ethics, values, and morals that guide us and give us meaning and direction (Gorichanaz, 2022). Spiritual wellness entails the spirit searching for meaning and purpose in human existence, leading us to strive for harmony while working to balance our inner needs with the rest of the world.

All of the above have a co-relation or an impact on mental wellness which is the central focus of this study, and I shall now attempt to define it in general and within the context of this study.

2.2.1. Mental wellness in general

Manderscheid, Ryff, Freeman, McKnight-Eily, Dhingra, & Strine (2010) refer to mental wellness as a positive psychological functioning. It is argued that psychological functioning is approached from humanistic, existential, and life-span developmental perspectives that emphasize growth, meaning, and personal capacity (Manderscheid et al., 2010). Some have defined mental wellness often with negative terms, as the absence of mental illness, but it has been understood that mental wellness is different from the absence of mental illness and that it is essential to our overall health (Restoule et al., 2015). With that being clarified, mental wellness is a broader, positive term associated with wellbeing, inherent strengths, and functioning in life (Restoule et al., 2015). It shows that there is a question mark around mental wellness that requires discussion. Within the context of this study, it is perhaps a fundamental step to find the understanding of mental wellness according to rural students.

Bodeker et al. (2020) conceptualize mental wellness in terms of a general sense of wellbeing in the physical, social, occupational, spiritual, financial, and environmental aspects of our lives. In addition, Restoule et al. (2015) further explained that a holistic understanding of mental wellness accounts for community relations and focuses on achieving balance of spirit, heart, mind, and physical being. "Wellness from Indigenous perspectives is a whole and healthy person expressed through a sense of balance of body, mind, emotion, and spirit. Central to wellness is belief in one's connection to language, land, beings of creation, and ancestry, supported by a caring family and environment" (Restoule et al., 2015:91). The mental wellness is focused on happiness and the other on human potential and that cover wide grounds of psychological experience: compassion, control, creativity, love, optimism, resilience, spirituality (Manderscheid et al., 2010).

2.2.3. Students' mental wellness

For students it is significant to have a holistic well-being, as it helps in their life in general and specifically in their academics. "Learning can be hindered by students' mental health" (VanderLind, 2017). The student's well-being is very significant as it plays a huge role on who they are in relation to others and mostly impact their academic performance. The university space is complex, and students need to be mentally well for their selves, family, and the university community at large and in order to secure the future they are seeking at university.

The rate of mental illness in university students is currently regarded as being higher than the general population prevalence (Pillay et al., 2020). Kalenga & Mngomezulu (2015) argued that globally 86% of university students were found to report from the above severe psychological problems including serious substance abuse at counselling centres. The most frequently studied mental illnesses studied in connection to students' academic success are depression and anxiety, often as mediated by perfectionism, meaning there is an interaction between types of perfectionism, depression, and anxiety (VanderLind, 2017). Eleftheriades, Fiala & Pasic (2020) also argue that the reoccurring mental wellness issues that students face are depression, anxiety, suicidality and self-injury, distress, graduate students and post-doctorate challenges, medical and health studies students, LGBTQ students' issues etc.

United Kingdom indicated that mental health illness or psychological problems within student populations were as high as 40 percent, with most students suffering from depression or anxiety (Kalenga & Mngomezulu, 2015). On the study by Arday (2018), Black and Minority Ethnic students in UK university indicated to consistently face barriers in terms of accessing culturally appropriate services including a lack of cultural understanding, communication issues, and where and how to seek help. And that barrier to accessing mental wellness support for ethnic minorities directly impacts upon attainment outcomes and psychological well-being (Arday, 2018). The issue leading to students not being able to access the assistance of mental wellness problems was found to be the racial inequality and discrimination, also the fear of further discrimination, reprisal, or judgement when reporting to mental wellness counselling (Arday, 2018).

Correspondingly, in South Africa, the concern about the prevalence of depression in young university students has been growing, gaining national interest and media has been covering it (Pillay et al., 2020). Students at South African universities recently have been voicing out about multiple suicides and suicide attempts done by their peers within campuses and seeking for more university mental wellness facilities (Pillay et al., 2020). Pillay et al. (2020) state that rural students coming from a schooling system that is inadequate in resources or other many ways, largely as a legacy of apartheid and continuing disadvantage also show to have mental wellness issues. "South African students from the historically oppressed majority, and especially those in rural communities, are faced with significant pressures and expectations given their socioeconomic plight, unlike many western adolescents" (Pillay et al., 2020:580). Some of the problems faced by university students leading to mental wellness issues are development of personal relationships, family dysfunctions, parenthoods, academic overloads, cross-cultural issues, competition with peers, concerns about the future (Kalenga & Mngomezulu, 2015) and moving away from home, newer academic pressures, and financial problems (Pillay et al., 2020). This is an overwhelming quantity of problems, and one can see how these could lead to Mental Wellness Challenges.

The mental wellness challenges are not only limited to students in the Humanities. South African medical students are also found to have the mental wellness burden with high rate of depression or depressive symptoms compared to their peers. "In the 18 - 35-year age range, when students generally undergo training, the South African Stress and Mental Health (SASH) survey estimated the prevalence of major depressive disorder (MDD) at 8.9% and that of anxiety-related disorders at 14.6%. SA medical students undertake rigorous, extended training at an undergraduate level" (van der Walt, Mabaso, Davids & de Vries, 2020:69). The factors that seem to influence their experience are financial difficulties, increased competition, language and cultural alienation, and under-preparedness for tertiary education (van der Walt et al., 2020). Food insecurity is also an emerging and alarming problem among the University of KwaZulu-Natal students and the problem is said to particularly affect students from poor households (Sabi, Kolanisi, Siwela & Naidoo, 2020). This without a doubt result to mental wellness issues. It is argued that more than 50% of the students in the University of KwaZulu-Natal are poor and from the black community (Sabi et al., 2020).

The increasing rates of student suicides at South African universities recently have intensified the urgency of developing coherent institutional strategies to address student mental wellness needs (Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019). However, Naidoo & Cartwright (2020) argue that the South African Student Counselling Services has a dynamic and complex history that has been shaped by the broader socio-political context within which the service and Higher Education as a whole, is embedded. "The country's apartheid legacy of racial oppression and discrimination perpetuated a wide range of political, socio-economic, and educational inequalities which continue to affect subsequent generations of Black people, including current students in need of Student Counselling Services. These factors all serve to hamper equitable utilization of transformative opportunities offered by Higher Education in a post-apartheid era" (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020:2). Therefore, the South African Student Services, in its current form, should be intervening in various ways of dealing with the inequalities and injustices created during apartheid (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). This is what the study seeks to do, to explore the ways in which students can be assisted with their mental wellness issues instead of merely identifying the inequalities within the services provided to assist their psychological wellness.

Kalkbrenner (2020) speaks about the counselling referral networks, whereby there are trained students to identify and refer their peers to mental wellness support facilities. However, the literature is lacking research on the potential effectiveness of this method of peer-to-peer mental wellness support (Kalkbrenner, 2020). The University of KwaZulu-Natal also have the student support services which are made up of a variety of entities such as psychological services, academic support, financial aid, and social systems (Dlamini, 2020). But it has been discovered that students under-utilize these facilities due to a lack of knowledge and awareness, as one of the reasons (Dlamini, 2020). Back in 2012 the university implemented a Food Security Programme to help address the issue of students' poverty (Sabi et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the literature has outlined the increase in students' mental wellness issues, while there are some responses to it by the universities, it is therefore, expected that there must be continuous research on the students' mental wellness.

2.3. Theatre

The global history of theatre spans centuries, marked by unique developments across regions. In England, theatres were banned in 1642 during the civil war and reopened in 1660 under royal monopolies (Macadam, 2024; Barnes, 2024). In the U.S., theatre began in 1752 and grew after the Revolutionary War, later diversifying with vaudeville and opera in the 19th century (Canning, 2023). Egyptian theatre originated in the 17th century through symbolic public performances that critiqued authority (Darnbrough, Bru & van den Bossche, 2023). Puppetry and shadow play expressed lower-class frustrations in subversive ways, anticipating Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Modern Egyptian theatre evolved under Isma'il Pasha's Western influence, with Yaqub Sanu emerging as a pioneering critical voice. His theatre was eventually shut down for challenging power structures (Darnbrough et al., 2023). These global examples illustrate how theatre has long been intertwined with sociopolitical realities.

In South Africa, theatre has a rich history, with roots dating back to the 1830s and a tradition of challenging apartheid and racial attitude (Smith, 2023). The most fundamental issue of course is to discover and learn to deal with fact and (real and potential) influence of the vast treasure-trove of events and artefacts produced before and during the colonised period, but ignored, denied or undervalued by commentators in the past (Smith, 2023). This situation, the processes involved and the causes for it all, are not unique to, or in any way limited to, South Africa of course, as the history of any former colony will testify (Smith, 2023). However, the political history of Southern Africa entrenched a specific way of thinking to such an extent that any wider awareness of tradition and cultural riches extending beyond purely colonial values was virtually impossible until very late in the twentieth century, except as a radical, oppositional, esoteric, or even eccentric area of study and contemplation (Kruger, 2019). The process of reinterpretation has only begun and still has a long way to go, as formerly hidden aspects of the history are unearthed, re-evaluated and integrated into the new thinking (Kruger, 2019).

2.3.1 Role of theatres

At its core, theatre is storytelling in its most immediate and visceral form. Different from films or television series, where editing, special effects, and the distance of a screen buffer the viewer from the action, theatre places its audience in the same physical space as the performers. This immediacy allows for a unique kind of engagement (Shearer, 2016). The audience is part of the story in a way that is impossible in other mediums, reacting in real time to the emotional ebbs and flows of the performance (Shearer, 2016). In this live environment, each performance is unique. Unlike films, which are fixed once completed, a theatre performance can change from night to night (Chadwick, 2023). Actors may deliver lines differently, audience reactions may vary, and unforeseen moments can shape the show in ways that neither the performers nor the viewers can predict. This unpredictability adds to the allure and magic of live theatre (Chadwick, 2023). Furthermore, theatre offers a platform for different kinds of narratives to be explored. Whether it's classical works that are continually reinterpreted for modern contexts or contemporary plays that tackle pressing social issues, theatre is a dynamic space for creative expression. It allows playwrights, directors, actors, and set designers to bring their collective vision to life, often highlighting the complexity of the human condition (Chadwick, 2023). This off course is one form or approach to theatre.

Theatre for empathy

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of theatre is its ability to foster empathy. When watching a play, we are not only observing characters on a stage, but we are also emotionally investing in their journeys. Thus, theatre allows us to step into the shoes of people whose experiences may be vastly different from our own, fostering a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives (Selvakumar, 2023). Plays often explore issues such as race, gender, class, and mental health, giving audiences a chance to confront difficult subjects in a safe and reflective environment. These plays not only entertain but also challenge societal prejudices and provoke thought. The shared experience of watching a performance, too, helps to cultivate a sense of community. Whether the play is a light-hearted comedy or a searing drama, theatre brings people from all walks of life together (Canning, 2023). For those few hours, the audience becomes a collective, sharing in the laughter, tension, or tears. This shared emotional journey creates a bond that is difficult to replicate through other forms of media (Canning, 2023).

Theatre for political commentary and social change

Throughout history, theatre has often served as a medium for political commentary and social change. From the ancient Greeks, who used tragedy to reflect on war and governance, to the modern day, theatre has always been a medium through which societies critique themselves (Mda, 2020). In the 20th century, playwrights like Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal developed theories of "epic" and "forum" theatre, where the aim was not just to entertain, but to inspire action. Brecht's works encouraged audiences to think critically about the societal structures in place, while Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed was explicitly designed to empower marginalised communities by giving them a voice through performance (Massó-Guijarro, Pérez-García & Cruz-González, 2021). In more recent times, productions such as *Hamilton*, a 2015 musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda that premiered in New York City and *An Octoroon*, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's 2014 adaptation first staged Off-Broadway at Soho Repertory Theatre have engaged with issues of race and identity, offering audiences an opportunity to reflect on contemporary social issues through the lens of historical narratives (Massó-Guijarro, et al, 2021)

Theatre as an educational tool

Theatre is also a vital educational tool, both in schools and beyond. For young people, participating in theatre whether through school plays, drama clubs, or theatre workshops offers a wealth of benefits. It helps develop communication skills, fosters teamwork, and encourages creativity (Gallagher, 2022). Students involved in theatre are also often more confident, empathetic, and open-minded, all vital skills for personal development and for academic and work careers (Gallagher, 2022). This reflection takes me back to my undergraduate training, particularly the modules *Theatre in Education (TIE)* and *Drama in Education (DIE)*, which significantly shaped my understanding of applied theatre practice. In these modules, we were required to engage directly with schools, identifying relevant educational or social themes that affected learners, and then designing and facilitating performances or workshops around those themes. Briefly, TIE focuses on using theatre as a tool to educate, often involving scripted or semi-scripted performances that engage audiences, usually young people in critical dialogue and reflection. DIE, on the other hand, emphasizes the use of dramatic methods within the classroom to support learning across subjects, encouraging active participation, role-play, and experiential discovery. These experiences equipped me with practical skills in research, facilitation, and performance-making, while also grounding my belief in theatre as a medium for learning, critical inquiry, and social engagement.

Theatre for critical thinking

Furthermore, theatre cultivates critical thinking through various methods, particularly within the broad spectrum of applied theatre practices. Applied theatre, which includes approaches such as Theatre for Development, Forum Theatre, Playback Theatre, and Verbatim Theatre, engages participants in reflective processes that challenge assumptions, question power dynamics, and explore multiple perspectives. For example, in Forum Theatre, developed by Augusto Boal, audiences become "spect-actors," actively intervening in scenes of oppression to propose alternative actions, thereby critically engaging with real-world issues. Similarly, devising theatre processes demand collaborative inquiry, problem-solving, and negotiation of meaning among participants. Whether through performing, spectating, or co-creating, theatre becomes a rehearsal space for critical consciousness, allowing individuals to interrogate societal norms, reflect on lived experiences, and imagine transformative possibilities

(Khanlou, Vazquez, Khan, Orazietti and Ross, 2022). In educational and community contexts alike, theatre not only entertains but also empowers people to analyse, question, and act in their lives and communities.

2.3.2 Theatres and wellness

Theatre can be a powerful therapeutic space, offering a dynamic environment where individuals can explore, process, and heal from emotional, psychological, or even physical challenges. The act of creating and performing theatre has long been recognized for its potential to facilitate healing and personal growth (Tait, 2021). Here are some ways theatre serves as a therapeutic space. Theatre offers a safe space for individuals to express their emotions, whether through acting, writing, or directing. For many, stepping into a character allows them to explore parts of themselves they might otherwise find difficult to express. The act of performing can be cathartic, allowing for the release of pent-up emotions, traumas, or anxieties (Tait, 2021). In theatre, performers and audiences alike engage with stories that may be vastly different from their own lived experiences. By stepping into another person's shoes literally and figuratively participants can develop a deeper sense of empathy, understanding, and connection with others (Sullivan, 2020.) This is particularly useful in therapeutic contexts where people are dealing with feelings of isolation or alienation.

Improvisational theatre exercises, support mental wellness by fostering spontaneity, emotional expression, active listening, and collaborative problem-solving, which can reduce anxiety, build confidence, and enhance a sense of connection and psychological resilience. This is where participants create scenes or narratives on the spot, encourage flexibility, adaptability, and creative problem-solving (Sullivan, 2020). These skills can be therapeutically helpful in dealing with stress, anxiety, or trauma, as they encourage individuals to be present in the moment, accept uncertainty, and find solutions in real-time. Therapeutic drama often involves role-playing exercises where participants embody different characters or viewpoints (Waldhier, 2023). This can help them reframe difficult situations from different perspectives or understand the dynamics of their own experiences more clearly. It's especially helpful in therapy for individuals with PTSD or interpersonal conflict, as it allows them to experiment with new ways of thinking or responding to past events (Waldhier, 2023).

Narrative therapy, which is rooted in the idea that people make sense of their lives through stories, aligns closely with theatre (Mendoza, 2020). By telling and retelling their personal narratives, individuals can gain a sense of agency and perspective. Theatre can help externalize a person's struggles, allowing them to view their life story from a distance and reorganize or rewrite the narrative in a way that promotes healing. Theatre often brings together people from diverse backgrounds to collaborate on a shared goal. This sense of community can be incredibly therapeutic, especially for individuals dealing with feelings of loneliness or social isolation (Baim & Baim, 2020). Group theatre projects build a sense of connection and support, which can be healing in and of itself.

Acting is not just about words it is also about physicality. Theatre encourages participants to use their bodies to communicate emotions, ideas, and stories (Baim & Baim, 2020). For individuals who may be disconnected from their bodies (due to trauma, anxiety, or depression), theatre can serve as a way to reconnect and develop a greater sense of bodily awareness. This can be a particularly useful tool in somatic therapy (Baim & Baim, 2020). Theatre offers a unique space for exploring and experimenting with identity. Its process of stepping into a character and then leaving it behind after a performance can mirror the potential for personal growth and change in real life (Baim & Baim, 2020). Theatre often uses symbolism, metaphor, and abstract storytelling, which can help individuals make sense of complex emotional or psychological experiences (Bauer, 2021). Symbolic representation can allow participants to externalize and better understand difficult feelings or experiences, enabling them to process and heal.

Both creating and listening to stories has therapeutic value. Storytelling can be a means of making sense of chaos or trauma. For individuals who have experienced hardship or crisis, creating a narrative around their experiences can provide a sense of control and closure (Kohrt, Ottman, Panter-Brick, Konner & Patel, 2020). Theatre allows stories to come alive, offering a multisensory, immersive experience that can deepen understanding and foster healing (Sousa, 2023). Theatre can be combined with other therapeutic practices like art therapy, music therapy, and dance/movement therapy. For example, in drama therapy, participants might create visual representations of their experiences or use movement to express emotions that words cannot fully capture. Integrating these various forms of expression helps broaden the scope of healing (Bauer, 2021).

Drama therapy, a more formal therapeutic approach, combines traditional therapeutic methods with the techniques of theatre (Bauer, 2021). It employs tools such as role-playing, dramatic improvisation, masks, and puppetry to help individuals express feelings, explore different aspects of themselves, and reframe negative or limiting beliefs. Drama therapists are trained professionals who guide clients through these processes to foster emotional, cognitive, and social healing (Bauer, 2021). Theatre's potential as a therapeutic space is vast and multi-dimensional. Whether through drama therapy, theatrical performance, or simply engaging with theatre as an art form, it offers unique ways for people to process experiences, enhance personal growth, and foster emotional healing. Through expression, empathy, creativity, and connection, theatre provides an outlet for exploring and transforming challenges into opportunities for healing (Bauer, 2021).

Drama therapy can help individuals process trauma by re-enacting past events within a safe and supportive space. Through embodying different roles and perspectives, individuals can regain a sense of agency, while improvisation and performance contribute to increased confidence and self-awareness (Arnstein, 2020). Drama therapy also supports individuals in working through issues of identity and self-expression, which is particularly beneficial for those experiencing depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In this context, theatre functions as both a mirror and a tool. It reflects one's internal struggles and allows one to experiment with different responses and solutions to life’s challenges (Arnstein, 2020). Theatre can also serve as a means of fostering community and social healing. In settings such as community theatre or interactive performances, individuals come together to create something larger than themselves, which fosters a sense of belonging and shared purpose. This is particularly important for people who feel marginalized or isolated, such as individuals recovering from addiction, refugees, or those experiencing mental health struggles (Arnstein, 2020).

Theatre is an inherently narrative medium, and storytelling is a powerful tool in healing. Personal storytelling, whether through monologues, autobiographical performances, or collaborative plays, allows individuals to reconstruct and reframe their experiences (Rice, Cook & Bailey, 2021). This process can help individuals make sense of trauma, find meaning in adversity, and regain a sense of control over their own narratives. In group settings, storytelling and theatre can encourage mutual understanding, helping individuals to feel less isolated by their struggles (Rice et al., 2021). By listening to others’ stories and witnessing the vulnerability of others on stage, people can experience solidarity and empathy, and shared stories can affirm one's own experience and help create a collective healing process.

Summing up, theatrical practices have long been celebrated for their ability to entertain, but their potential to heal is equally profound. Through emotional expression, role-playing, community building, improvisation, and physical movement, theatre offers an extraordinary tool for promoting well-being, addressing mental health, and fostering collective healing. Whether used in formal therapeutic settings, community programs, or as a personal practice, the healing power of the arts and theatre provides a pathway to self-discovery, resilience, and emotional health.

2.3.3 Theatre and mental wellness

Nicholson (2005) talks about theatre as a platform for making a difference. Nicholson (2005) argues that ways of doing become exhausted and new problems appear and require new methods. In this study, I believe that theatre can be a new method of addressing student's mental wellness issues in the University of KwaZulu-Natal and it can make a difference. Also, the students' lives in the university spaces evolve and reality changes. The issues students face keeps changing as Nicholson (2005) argues that the oppressors do not work in the same way in every epoch, thus they cannot be always defined in the same fixed style. Further, theatre creates the space for recognition that leads to understanding (Emunah, 1994). It does not lead to escaping of truth but to confrontation of truth (Emunah, 1994). This study creates the space for students' voices about their mental wellness in relation to their experiences in the university, and findings will contribute to the body of knowledge in the field.

Theatre can be an effective means of health promotion (Seguin & Rancourt, 1996). Woodland (2016) argues that even though theatre has long been used to promote ideas in educational, social, and political contexts, it is only relatively recently that interest has developed in using it for health promotion. Theatre holds potential as one example of a creative arts-based approach, employing the tools of ethnography and artistry to convey complex messages with social and personal meaning (Michalak, Livingston, Maxwell, Hole, Hawke & Parikh, 2014). There is good evidence that the creative arts have a part in promoting the mental wellness and wellbeing of participants and challenging stigma against people with mental wellness problems to encourage social inclusion (Quinn, Shulman, Knifton & Byrne, 2011) & (Michalak et al., 2014). According to Woodland (2016), "Health Theatre" transforms qualitative research data into dramatic form, where it becomes more accessible and emotionally engaging. Michalak et al. (2014) agree that theatrical interventions are an example of narrative medicine and a specific knowledge translation. The aim of using theatre is not to find the best solution but to produce a variety of options that can be used (Seguin & Rancourt, 1996), in mental wellness situations given. Applying theatre to mental wellness will lead us to richer understanding of ourselves and our worldly relationships (Ngong, 2017).

Most cases which are written about theatre and mental wellness are found in Applied Theatre (Drama Therapy, Playback Theatre, Forum Theatre) literature, whereby cases show theatre being used as an intervention for awareness, a healing tool, etc. Most articles show the cases whereby theatre has been used in cases of mental illness stigma, whether in adults or teenagers. For instance, Quinn et al. (2011) presented a study about a mental wellness festival with different theatre-based interventions that took place in two weeks and found modest positive impacts.

According to Jones (1996), the terms Applied Theatre and or Applied Drama are a kind of shorthand to describe forms of dramatic activity that primarily exist outside the conventional mainstream, and which are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities, and societies. The development of experimental theatre and psychology resulted in a new perception of how drama and theatre can effectively bring about change in people: emotional, psychological, political, and spiritual change (Jones, 1996). Emunah (1994) argues that it is the intentional and systematic use of drama process to achieve psychological growth and change. As much as applied theatre has been used for mental wellness concept in different scenarios, here the study seeks to find whether theatre has been used to investigate the students' perceptions and experiences of mental wellness in universities, specifically in UKZN. The study will take the decolonial turn in investigating the students' perception on the mental wellness within the university as one had not come across a study that uses theatre in the same way.

It has shown clearly that the theatrical traditions in relation to mental wellness, hold the potential to impact audience members, both at affective and cognitive levels, and to foster insight and deepened understanding (Michalak et al., 2014). "Using theatre acting in mental health wellness will facilitate remediation, rehabilitation, personal and social adjustments of the patients involved and make the entire process to serve as a specific form of intervention to bring about intrapsychic, interpersonal, or behavioural changes" (Ngong, 2017:2)

2.4. Summary of the chapter

This chapter presents a structured review of literature that builds a comprehensive understanding of wellness, with a specific focus on mental wellness. It begins by exploring general concepts of wellness before narrowing the focus to mental wellness in the context of student experiences. The chapter then examines the intersection of theatre and wellness, highlighting how theatre can serve as a reflective and transformative tool for mental well-being. Throughout, both global and South African perspectives are incorporated to provide a contextual and comparative lens. This layered approach offers a strong theoretical foundation for the study's investigation into rural Black students' mental wellness through applied theatre.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

A theoretical framework is founded by a recognised theory or theories. Mokhutso (2019) argues that the theory may be seen as a system that shapes concepts in a way that produces an understanding of or intuition into an identified subject to a researcher. The theory combines other scholars' ideas and views that clarify how things are done in that aspect (Khumalo et al, 2010). According to Onsaloo & Grant (2016), when the study is erected around a theoretical framework, that theory becomes an inherent tool for comprehending and investigating the research problem. The role of the scholarly theory/ theories is to explain, predict and interpret and, in many circumstances, to question and extend the existing knowledge (Spalding University Library, 2021). Therefore, the researcher brings the theoretical framework as a theoretical argument that supports the study being investigated. The theoretical framework explains why the research problem under investigation exists (Spalding University Library, 2021). Onsaloo & Grant (2016) further argue that the theoretical framework provides a grounded base for the literature review and the methods of analysis. It is therefore required for a researcher to select the theory that will support, shape, and direct the initial perceptions seen as a problem being investigated. The analysis of this study will be constructed through Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed from Ramos's (1996) interpretation.

3.2 Pedagogy of the Oppressed

This is the principal theory that guides the study being investigated. Ramos (1996) argues that the purpose of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed is the humanisation of the oppressed from the recognition of dehumanisation through the oppressors (colonizers). The oppressor's consciousness is that humanity is a thing that is exclusive of some (Gomes, 2017). Ramos (1996) argues that dehumanisation was done through the injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors towards the oppressed.

The oppressor's aim is transforming everything surrounding it into the object of its domination (Gomes, 2017) and according to Ramos (1996) there is no one else more prepared to fight the struggle of the oppressed than the oppressed. The oppressed are the ones who are experiencing the unjust society and who understand the importance and necessity of liberation (Ramos, 1996). Therefore, by fighting for the restoration of their humanity, they will be fighting for the restoration of true generosity among each other, of the world and the generosity of the university. (Ramos, 1996). For instance, Ramos (1996) argues that one of the problems during the initial stage of the struggle is that mostly the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend to become oppressors or 'sub-oppressors'. They have been taught and internalised that to be a man for them is to be the oppressor and their hunger or desire to be a man leads to them to be part of the oppressors (Ramos, 1996). The Pedagogy of the Oppressed also speaks of the prescription concept which shows the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed (Ramos, 1996). The oppressor is the prescriber and the oppressed is the body or the container where the prescription is done (Ramos, 1996). Ramos (1996) explains that this prescription characterizes the imposition of the oppressor's choice upon the oppressed, transforming the oppressed consciousness into one that confirms with the oppressor's consciousness. Therefore, this makes the behaviour of the oppressed to be a prescribed behaviour as it follows the rules of the prescriber (Ramos, 1996). The oppressor uses science and technology to constantly manipulate, exploit the oppressed (Ramos, 1996).

In the historical background of this theory, Ramos (1996) further talks about the importance of the oppressed to recognise their oppression (reality of life). He argues that the oppressed must critically recognise the oppression causes so that through transforming action they will be able to create a new situation different from the oppressive one, that will make possible the quest of fuller humanity (Ramos, 1996). According to Ramos (1996) as long the oppressed are unaware of the oppression causes, they will passively accept their exploitation. He further talks about those who have adapted the structure of domination, saying that they are not a threat only to the oppressor but also to their fellow comrades as they fear for more oppression (Ramos, 1996). He (1996) also emphasizes that the oppressed must think of the world as a world of possibilities, the world with limiting situations which they can change. That perception of possibilities is necessary but not as the only one needed for liberation but as a motivation for the struggle of liberation (Ramos, 1996). Subjectivity is very necessary and significant in the struggle of liberation otherwise the fight for freeing themselves is naïve (Ramos, 1996).

From the recognition of reality, the oppressed must no longer submit to the oppressor. That can be done through the means of praxis, the reflection and action (Ramos, 1996). Firstly, the oppressed must uncover the world of oppression and commit themselves to transforming it (Ramos, 1996). This must happen through the change in the way they perceive it, not as the closed world with no exit but the world that has limitations that can be changed (Ramos, 1996). This is the stage of dealing with the consciousness of the oppressed and the one of the oppressors (Ramos, 1996).

Ramos (1996) in his argument, also clarifies that the correct method of liberation lies in dialogue, which is the critical and liberating dialogue. This dialogue must be carried on with the oppressed at any stage of liberating them (Ramos, 1996). Ramos (1996) argues that this can be done in correspondence with the historical conditions and the level of which the oppressed perceives reality. Having the struggle for liberation and not having the dialogue is treating them the same the oppressor does, as objects (Ramos, 1996). He says that in this case the oppressed are seen as things that need to be saved from a burning building and transform them into masses that can be manipulated, and this is unacceptable (Ramos, 1996).

There is also a teacher student relationship whereby the education is narrated (Ramos, 1996). The students are treated as objects, who cannot interact with the teacher (Ramos, 1996). The teacher talks about reality as something that students do not relate to, something that is still and motionless (Ramos, 1996). Or the teacher will explain the topic that is foreign to the students' existential experience (Ramos, 1996). This mostly happens in the Eurocentric universities that teach the foreign knowledge to colonized/ oppressed students. The task of the teacher is to fill the students with the content that is detached from their reality and the students memorize unconsciously that content narrated to them (Ramos, 1996). He further explains that the students become the containers and the more the container is filled, the better the teacher she is (Ramos, 1996). Equally, as the students get filled more, they become better students (Ramos, 1996). He calls this the deposition of education, which is the banking concept of education (Ramos, 1996).

In the act of banking education, students are receivers (Ramos, 1996). The knowledge is not considered to be emerging from the relationship between human beings and the world, with the world, and with each other but from the oppressor, who supposedly "knows everything" (Ramos, 1996). With the banking education, the aim of the oppressor is to change the oppressed consciousness not the living conditions that oppress them (Ramos, 1996). The banking education absences authentic thinking and communication, dialogue and take students as objects (Ramos, 1996). It is manipulating and prevents creativity (Ramos, 1996).

He then introduces problem-posing education whereby the students and the teacher engage in authentic thinking that is concerned about their reality within the university context (Ramos, 1996). They together problematize the "true knowledge" of their experiences within the oppressor's space and create together the knowledge of reality, the knowledge of their existence (Ramos, 1996). This theoretically encourage the students to be committed to change as it evokes new understandings of their world and its challenges (Ramos, 1996). Problem-posing education regards the dialogue as means to uncover the world's reality (Ramos, 1996).

3.2.1. The relevancy of this theoretical framework in this study

In this study, the students' mental health wellness is dehumanising, and it is affected by colonial experiences within the structures of the university, which is a colonised space since the apartheid era. Even though there may be changes implemented post-apartheid, the university spaces are the spaces that still neutralizes war of colonisation. Students face the colonial structures that have the impact on their daily lives within the university space which also influence their mental health wellness. The university system being one of the colonial structures that remained after apartheid. Therefore, black students are the oppressed who are still at war with colonisation as historically during apartheid were not the target market for the formal universities, thus ways of engagement are designed for students of a different culture as the indigenous knowledge has not been recognised in these universities. Therefore, the Pedagogy of the Oppressed opens the space for students to fight for restoring their humanity. It is a lens through which students can recognise their history, their reality of life and critically engage on it for revolution.

The oppressed are in the struggle to recover their lost humanity by fighting for justice (Ramos, 1996) and the study seeks to open the space for students to expose any of the injustices that affects their mental health wellness. According to the Pedagogy of The Oppressed, students should not fold hands to their struggle however, they should critically engage their everyday life experiences and thoughts of what is happening in the university that might impact their mental wellness. No one else should fight the students' mental wellness issues than themselves.

In the university, as a western created space, the students are being fed knowledge, the western epistemology. In universities, the aim is to fill up the students with the western knowledge that continues to serve the interests of the oppressor. Students need to critically engage in this and how it impacts their mental health wellness, and the theatre space presents various tools in which students can look at this matter. The students must recognise such things that have the impacts on their mental health wellness.

Students should not find themselves reproducing oppression by oppressing their own. This reflects Ramos' (1996) argument that the oppressor conditions the oppressed to believe that to attain legitimacy or authority, they must imitate the oppressor. This dynamic is evident in what students have historically referred to as "sellouts," a term describing student leaders in SRCs, who prioritise the interests of university management over the struggles of the broader student body. Such practices reproduce institutional oppression and fracture student solidarity.

The theatre space in this study seeks to open the space whereby the students have the mentality to see the limiting situations that impact their mental health wellness and critically engage on it for transformation. The theatre space is a space of possibility. They must value their own feelings, opinions to fight the struggle of their own mental health wellness. The investigation of this study seeks to use theatre in dealing with the consciousness of the students as the ones who are oppressed by the mental health wellness discomfort within the university. Students must uncover the world of the mental health wellness issues within the university, the reality of university life and commit themselves in transforming it. And when the reality of the oppression has been transformed, this pedagogy stops to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent emancipation (Ramos, 1996). This study will cover the first stage of recognition of reality and make the conclusions that will lead to the second stage.

The dialogue is very significant in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and as mentioned in the methodology and method of the study, there will be a dialogue participation facilitated through the whole theatre process as the tool for investigation. One can then analyse the process of the dialogue with the students, and its value in figuring out how to best assist students with issues of mental health, from the students' point of view. In this study, the students who participated were not passive, but they were true dialoguers engaging in critical thinking (Ramos, 1996).

This theatrical study seeks to raise the consciousness of the students about the course of their mental health wellness issues, which may include them being the banks of the knowledge they cannot relate their lives to. The knowledge that does not solve their daily encountered problems. This concept of education, knowledge is given by those who consider themselves knowledgeable (Ramos, 1996). The university mostly uses the books, the library content, the curriculum that serves the interest of the oppressor as the one who knows everything. They present this knowledge as a gift to those they consider knowing nothing (Ramos, 1996). In one of the decolonisation discussions in the previous years, I brought the issues of the Western Psychology as it made the profession, and the African Psychology made a mere module under it. In an African university, how is this relevant?

The study, using theatre as the tool to investigate, seeks to find the creative ways in which students can express themselves and produce knowledge. That is referred as problem-posing education (Ramos, 1996). They arguably become active students and critical thinkers of their mental health experiences, in relation to what the colonised space of the university offers.

In this, they're critically reflecting on their experiences within the educational space becomes a practice of emancipation, a revolutionary educational process that carries with it a seed for liberation (Ramos, 1996).

3.3. The connection between theoretical framework and ontology and epistemology of the study.

3.3.1. Ontology

Haswell (2010) suggests that ontology refers to a philosophical framework for understanding concepts, viewed as a branch of metaphysics**.** This field focuses on how social entities, categories, and their relationships are conceptualized within a system of knowledge. According to Creswell (2013), ontology deals with the fundamental nature of reality and its defining features**.** In this study, the ontology is constructive, grounded in the belief that reality is not objective or fixed, but rather socially constructed and experienced differently across individuals and contexts. The focus on Black rural students' mental wellness in the university space is rooted in the assumption that mental wellness is shaped by the socio-cultural, institutional, and historical environments in which individuals are situated. The researcher approaches this as also deeply informed by race, geography, class, and institutional structures.

Essentially, the study operates from the ontological stance that multiple realities exist, and that understanding mental wellness requires an engagement with the subjective, experiential realities of those most affected by the university's cultural and structural dynamics. This stance contests dominant, often western, definitions of mental wellness, and instead centers the voices, narratives, and meanings constructed by rural Black students themselves.

3.3.2. Epistemology

According to Easterby-Smith, et al, (2002), epistemology refers to the primarily philosophical perspective that informs the research process, guiding how research questions are linked to methodological choices. In this study, an interpretivist lens is applied to explore how knowledge about the research topic is understood and how it relates to the researcher's position (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Selecting an appropriate epistemological position directly influences the overall research paradigm, which in turn determines the methods employed for data collection (Denscombe, 2003). Cresswell (2014) argues that the epistemological presumption when conducting the qualitative research, requires the researcher to be near as possible to participants to gather subjective data.

This study is constructive/ interpretive epistemologically, holding that knowledge is not discovered but co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and the participants. The knowledge about mental wellness is subjective and situated in the lived experiences of rural Black students. This argues that there are various ways of knowing and they are informed by cultural, historical and personal contexts. The goal is to understand how mental wellness is experienced, interpreted, and expressed by those at the margins of institutional recognition.

3.4. Summary of the chapter

This chapter presents Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed as the supervisory theoretical framework for understanding the mental wellness experiences of rural Black students in the university space. Pedagogy of the Oppressed provides a critical lens through which to examine how education systems, especially within higher education can reproduce or resist systemic oppression. This chapter places the university as a place of both potential oppression and transformation for rural Black students. By using this theoretical framework, the study positions rural Black students' mental wellness not just as an individual psychological issue, but as a political and structural concern tied to power, visibility, and voice. The Pedagogy of the Oppressed challenges universities to not only recognize mental health disparities, but to transform the oppressive conditions that sustain them.

Chapter 4

Research methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed in investigating the mental wellness experiences of rural Black students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus. Grounded in a qualitative research paradigm, the study adopts a critical ethnographic approach to explore how applied theatre can reveal, interrogate, and reimagine the lived realities of students who navigate structural, cultural, and academic challenges within the university space. Given the nature of the inquiry which seeks to centre marginalised voices and foster emancipatory dialogue, the methodology is aligned with Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), particularly as interpreted by Ramos (1996), to engage participants as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects.

The chapter begins by discussing the research approach and design, followed by a detailed participant selection, and sampling strategies. It then outlines the data collection tools of theatre techniques which are workshop-based engagement. The chapter concludes by addressing ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness of the study. This methodological framework was intentionally selected to support the study's transformative goals and to honour the cultural and social contexts of the participants involved.

4.2 Research approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is well-suited to exploring complex, context-bound human experiences. According to Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020), qualitative research enables an in-depth examination of individuals' lived experiences within their natural settings, employing a specific set of flexible and context-sensitive methods. At its core, qualitative research seeks to capture the authentic voices and perspectives of participants, emphasizing how experiences are lived, felt, and personally constructed**.** Pholoana (2020) further characterizes qualitative methodologies as strategic approaches aimed at investigating social phenomena to generate meaningful explanations of human behaviour, often through an exploration of socially constructed viewpoints. Grounded in an interpretivist epistemology**,** qualitative research assumes that knowledge is socially constructed through subjective experience and interaction (Ndlela, 2021). This perspective aligns with the study's goal of understanding mental wellness as it is experienced by rural Black students within the university space**.**

The research employed a critical ethnographic design, enriched by using theatre-based tools, to explore participants' narratives and expressions of mental wellness. Critical ethnography provided a framework for the researcher to engage deeply and reflexively with the participants, facilitating a relational and immersive inquiry process. This approach enabled the researcher to generate rich, detailed insights into the lived realities and meaning-making processes of students whose experiences are often marginalized or overlooked in mainstream academic discourse.

4.2.1 Research methodology: Critical ethnography

Thomas (1993) defines critical ethnography as a reflective mode of inquiry that interrogates culture, knowledge, and action. It is not merely descriptive but aims to critique and challenge power structures embedded in cultural norms and practices. According to Sign (2016), critical ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that explores and deconstructs dominant discourses, those perceived as the 'correct' or accepted ways of seeing, thinking, speaking, or acting in society with the intention of addressing and transforming social injustices. It represents a decolonial turn: a shift from accepting what is towards envisioning and striving for what ought to be. Thomas (1993) further argues that critical ethnography applies a disruptive lens to the conventional logic of cultural inquiry, thereby expanding the researcher's capacity to see, hear, and feel beyond normative boundaries. It is a form of praxis that recognises the intricate relationships between individuals, the world, and one another (Ramos, 1996). Critical ethnography explicitly challenges the dominant voices that sustain structural injustices and oppressive conditions, what Ramos (1996) terms as limiting situations, which consistently serve the interests of the oppressor.

In this study, the theatrical investigation serves as a critical ethnographic intervention aimed at revealing and challenging such limiting situations as they manifest within the university context, particularly in relation to the mental wellness of rural Black students. These institutional constraints often produce psychological and emotional burdens that excessively affect marginalised students. To avoid triggering participants by revisiting individual traumatic experiences, the data collection methods have been carefully designed to focus on collective expressions and shared realities rather than individual disclosures.

The aim of critical ethnography is to uncover and confront structural inequalities and oppression, with the ultimate purpose of empowering individuals and groups toward collective liberation (Cohen et al., 2007). This makes it a fitting methodology for the present study, which seeks to reveal how institutional structures within the university context may impact student mental wellness. It provides a framework for facilitating critical dialogue, what Ramos (1996) describes as a necessary component of liberation. Through this dialogue, participants are not merely subjects of research, but co-constructors of knowledge who reclaim their agency through narration and collective reflection.

It is further argued that critical ethnography is inherently political, concerned with questions of power, voice, domination, and resistance (Cohen et al., 2007). Within the context of this research, the university is conceptualized as a Eurocentric institution whose epistemologies and structures remain largely untransformed. These colonial legacies contribute to systemic inequalities in knowledge production and learning experiences, which in turn adversely affect the mental wellness of rural Black students. The study therefore positions critical ethnography as a revolutionary tool for interrogating and reimagining these structural dynamics.

In this study approach, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers a theoretical foundation by challenging the traditional dichotomy between the knowledgeable oppressor and the passive, unknowing oppressed. Ramos (1996) emphasizes the need to reject the idea that the oppressed cannot produce knowledge. In this study, participants were encouraged to move from a state of “what is” to “what should be,” through the mechanism of Theatre of the Oppressed methods, thus contributing to a process of social transformation through critical engagement rather than top-down instruction.

A vital aspect of critical ethnography is reflexivity, the researcher's constant self-awareness and examination of their role within the research process. Haynes (2012) defines reflexivity as the ability to recognize how the researcher’s own position, experiences, and assumptions influence both the process and outcomes of the study. It involves continuously revisiting and revising one's prior knowledge in light of new insights. According to Cohen et al. (2007), reflexivity is a central characteristic of critical ethnography, and Foley (2002) adds that it should permeate all aspects of ethnographic practice, from fieldwork relationships and interpretive methods to the construction of research narratives. In this study, the researcher positions herself as an engaged, reflective participant throughout the research process, working collaboratively with participants from inception to completion. Through positioning herself as the main Workshop facilitator and mediator between participants and performers, she straddles the line between participant and observer. The reflective stance guides the development of ideas and interpretations that shape the direction and impact of the study.

4.3. Sample

The rural Black post-graduate (Masters and PhDs) students aged from 20 to 35 years from the college of Humanities were the participants for this study. By virtue of their social positions as rural, Black students, they are seen as oppressed/ disadvantaged in multiple ways and meet the criteria of participating in this study. The researcher got 10 students from this college (please see details below of how this sample was selected). The reason behind this number is because this is Qualitative research, and the researcher wanted to focus in-depth with the participants’ contribution and reflection. Having the large number was going limit on focusing and unpacking the participants’ reflection. The gender was 50/50, with equal representation of male and female identifying students, allowing for perspectives from both genders within the university context.

Participant no.	Age	Gender	Level of Study
1	22	Female	Masters
2	25	Male	Masters
3	25	Male	Masters
4	25	Male	Masters
5	26	Female	PhD
6	26	Male	Masters
7	27	Female	PhD
8	27	Female	Masters
9	29	Male	Masters
10	30	Female	Masters

4.3.1 Sampling technique

The researcher used purposive sampling to find the participants of the study. According to Rai & Thapa (2015), "purposive sampling represents a group of different non-probability sampling techniques. Also known as judgmental, selective or subjective sampling, purposive sampling relies on the judgement of the researcher when it comes to selecting the units (e.g., people, cases/organizations, events, pieces of data) that are to be studied." As such this study targeted students with a Rural background via direct contact and communication with known students with a rural background. The researcher asked for referrals of people that they know who also meet the criteria. An informal conversation was had with each potential participant prior to signing the Informed Consent form to confirm their profile and appropriateness for the research.

This process was supported by going in person to Postgraduate Laboratories and directly approaching students in person and engaging them through a word-of-mouth elimination process following the stipulated criteria for the research. Fliers were handed out in person and students were requested to spread the word to others. Students who responded were engaged in an informal conversation that confirms if they met the criteria prior to enlisting them for the study.

The first 10 students who met the criteria were selected (Black, Rural Background, Humanities Faculty, Pietermaritzburg campus, Postgraduate, between ages 20-35, currently studying at UKZN) also considered availability on the days scheduled for Data Collection Workshops. All participants were required to fill in a consent form prior to participating in the data collection process.

4.4. Data collection instrument

The process of the data collection was executed using the Augusto Boal’s methods which are Image Theatre and Forum Theatre. The researcher and the participants worked together in examining the mental wellness matters through these two Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed methods. Image Theatre and Forum Theatre are methods found in the Theatre of the Oppressed framework referred to as “rehearsal for transformation of reality” invented by Boal in the 1970s (Mitchell & Freitag, 2011). Boal refers to his approach as a rehearsing for a revolution, and it is influenced by Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Mitchell & Freitag, 2011). It is theatre intended to bring about change in people’s thinking, doing, and bringing about the imagining of an ideal world.

Image Theatre- is another tool in Augusto Boal’s methods, to express the feelings and thoughts and bring social change. There are many ways to get the spect-actors to make images with their bodies. The spect-actors are given a theme, and they must make images of that theme (Jackson, 1992). The joker can use the method whereby the spect-actors do their own individual images and come back to the stage to present them, or they make group images (Jackson, 1992). The watching group or other spect-actors are allowed to remake the images if they do not agree with the images presented (Jackson, 1992). Jackson (1992) adds that spect-actors can change, build on, or complete the presented image. This is done so that everyone agrees with the image of that specific theme and when everyone agrees it is finally called a Real Image, image of reality (Jackson, 1992). Jackson (1992) argues that the image must always be a representation of an oppression. The spect-actors are then asked to make an image in which the oppression will be disappeared and that is called an Ideal Image, image of ideality (Jackson, 1992). It is an image that represent their desired society in which problems will have been solved (Jackson, 1992). After that the spect-actors need to go back to the real image, think using the images, speak with their hands and no words must be used (Jackson, 1992). The spect-actors must show in a visual for that how possible to move from the world of reality to the world they desire and that is called the Image of Possible Transition (Jackson, 1992). The spect-actors must express themselves rapidly so that they do not find themselves thinking with word (Jackson, 1992). This is how the theatre creates the space for student’s voices in this study, helping them to understand their repressive condition and see the world differently from oppression.

Forum Theatre- “Forum Theatre was born when I could not understand what a spectator was saying to me when she wanted us to improvise her ideas, and I invited her to come up on stage fantastic transgression and show, herself, what she had in mind. I invited her to enact her thoughts, instead of just speaking to them (Boal, 2001, p. 309*)”* quoted by (Dwyer, 2010:200).

In Forum Theatre audience members/participants are given an opportunity to actively take on the moral dilemmas they are presented with, by entering the play being performed by actors, and take on the role of one character (Day, 2010). In this theatre method, there is an oppressor and the oppressed and the theatre is for bringing revolution, emancipating the oppressed. In this study, the oppressed are the rural Black students, by virtue of their social positions as rural, Black students in the native university. The oppressor is the mental torment/discomfort within the university. A play is performed which presents a problem and ends in an unsolved form, ending unfavourable for the main character/s (Day, 2010). The actor/s do the play for a second time and this time the audience members can intervene and bring the play to the end they would desire (Day, 2010). Gourd & Gourd (2011) state that the audience intervene by giving advice to the actor or by coming to stage and show the actor what to do or taking on a role of that specific character they would like to see changing the behaviour or join the scene as a new character. According to Day (2010), the audience do this by shouting “Stop!”, at the point where they want to intervene in the scene. The scene freezes and the joker recognises the audience member to take the role to try out the alternative or desirable behaviour (Day, 2010). This game continues with interventions being enacted by different volunteers from the audience and the joker’s role is also to make sure solutions are explored adequately by the volunteers and that they are to some extent possible in real life (Day, 2010). In between taking and playing roles differently and in the end of the performance, the joker keeps asking the questions about the outcome to generate debate about the problem presented by the performance (Day, 2010).

In this study, both Image Theatre and Forum Theatre were employed, and they create a space for students’ voices around their mental wellness in relation to their experiences in the university by allowing the students to participate in the theatre processes. Therefore, the student participants are called spect-actors (Jackson, 1992). They become involved in the process as both spectator and actor as they obverse and create dramatic meaning and action in a performance (Jackson, 1992). The researcher was the joker in the processes of both Image and Forum Theatre and requested one of the drama masters’ students to be a scriber of the whole theatre process. The decision was taken in agreement with the supervisor. Taking this role allowed me as a researcher to facilitate workshops as a co-participant, using theatre to create a safe, dialogic space. This allowed for reflexivity, as argued in the critical ethnography methodology. The researcher requested a Drama masters’ student to do the scribes. The scriber was taking pictures and recordings (voice and video recordings) for all workshops. The supervisor could not be treated as an external observer in the workshop. She functioned, especial in the first workshop, as an extension of facilitator role, as and when was necessary but remained the central anchor to the facilitation process.

4.4.1 Image Theatre workshop

The image theatre workshop was designed to happen in one day, however it ended up taking two days. This was because we could not finish on the first day as participants had much to share regarding their mental wellness experiences. The intensity and emotional depth of what participants shared demanded careful consideration of their mental wellbeing. The researcher was mindful not to compromise their psychological safety by insisting on continued participation when they appeared fatigued or emotionally overwhelmed. Prioritising participant wellbeing over data collection was a deliberate ethical stance. As such, only the *Real Image and Ideal Image* exercises were conducted on the first day. The second day of the Image Theatre workshops began with a brief recap of the previous session and proceeded with the *Image of Possible Transaction.*

On the first day of Image Theatre, one female participant was unable to participate in the workshop due to illness. Although she initially arrived at the venue, she was excused prior to the commencement of the session as she was not feeling well. As a result, she did not take part in the workshop activities. On the second day, two female participants were absent from the workshop due to urgent family commitments. They informed the researcher of their unavailability approximately two hours prior to the scheduled start of the session

The researcher as the joker, welcomed the participants to both workshops. She then introduced the day, the purpose, the rules of the Image theatre and taught them the games to welcome them into the space. After the joker took the participants to the image exercises so that they can use the image techniques which are Real Image, Ideal Image and the Image of Possible transition (Jackson, 1992). The joker also explained these techniques to participants and allowed them the space to make the images around the theme of mental wellness in general for the rural Black students. A Real Image is an image of reality (Jackson, 1992). Jackson (1992) argues that the image must always be a representation of an oppression. The spect-actors are then asked to make an image in which the oppression will be disappeared and that is called an Ideal Image, image of ideality (Jackson, 1992). It is an image that represent their desired society in which problems will have been solved (Jackson, 1992). After that the spect-actors need to go back to the real image, think using the images, speak with their hands and no words must be used (Jackson, 1992). The spect-actors must show in a visual for that how possible to move from the world of reality to the world they desire and that is called the Image of Possible Transition (Jackson, 1992). The spect- actors must express themselves rapidly so that they do not find themselves thinking with word (Jackson, 1992). This is how the theatre created the space for students' voices during this workshop, helping them to understand their repressive condition and see the world differently from oppression. This image theatre sessions revealed the spect-actors (students) experiences on their mental wellness within the university, both from a current and future point of view. The image sessions also created the questions that the joker asked the spect-actors in the process as they were constructing images in support of generating more data.

4.4.2 Forum Theatre workshop

In Forum Theatre, a play is performed which presents a problem and ends in an unsolved form, ending unfavourable for the main character/s (Day, 2010). The actors do the play for a second time and this time the audience members can intervene and bring the play to the end they would desire (Day, 2010). Gourd & Gourd (2011) state that the audience intervene by giving advice to the actor or by coming to stage and show the actor what to do or taking on a role of that specific character they would like to see changing the behaviour or join the scene as a new character. According to Day (2010), the audience do this by shouting "Stop!", at the point where they want to intervene in the scene. The scene freezes and the joker recognises the audience member to take the role to try out the alternative or desirable behaviour (Day, 2010). This game continues with interventions being enacted by different volunteers from the audience and the joker's role is also to make sure solutions are explored adequately by the volunteers and that they are to some extent possible in real life (Day, 2010). In between taking and playing roles differently and in the end of the performance, the joker keeps asking the questions about the outcome to generate debate about the problem presented by the performance (Day, 2010).

The whole Forum Theatre came, the participants again were welcome through theatre games. Four male participants were absent from the workshop. Two were unable to attend due to illness, one cited an urgent family commitment, and the fourth participant was delayed in returning from his hometown in another city and was therefore unable to arrive on time. The scene created by the researcher and two Drama students acting, took place. The actors performed the rehearsed scenes, and the spect-actors were instructed as per the rules of Forum Theatre, by the joker to engage on the performance whether by sharing their thought or giving directions to actors on what to do in the situation presented. The play created was contracted from the themes that came out of the first two workshops of Image Theatre.

The oppressor in this whole Theatre of The Oppressed process is the mental torment/discomfort. This is what the students are fighting against, however they are fighting within the system that is supposed to be supportive and protective but the space itself have the elements that perpetuate the oppression. Therefore, this study, at best, created spaces for the articulation of student voices in relation to their mental wellness, which can potentially contribute to them becoming aware of the ways in which they experience oppression as rural, Black students. It also highlighted the injustices that student continue to experience in the neoliberal corporate university.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

Anonymity- the researcher got the participants' informed consent. The gatekeeper permission was applied for from the UKZN registrar to get a permission to conduct research at the university campus. The participants' identity was protected and guaranteed confidentiality. They participated given their consent and they were free to withdraw from the study with no consequences.

Maleficence- the counselling services provided by the College of Humanities were secured for participants from the initial stages of data collection to the end and after should there be a need, given the focus of the research, which can be triggering. In any case of triggers during the process, the student counsellor was to be called right away as she was notified and ready to assist during the whole research process and after. Participants were given consent before participating and if they wished to stop participating at any time, they were free to withdraw from the study with no consequences. However, there was never a time where this was necessary. The research tools seemed sufficient in holding the participants emotionally and confidentially. Through the employed Dramatic games and exercises the participants quickly developed a strong bond and there seemed to be enough trust afforded in the room, to allow participants to go into spaces of engagement that were perceived as honest and vulnerable.

4.6. Summary of the chapter

This chapter has in-depth the methodological framework underpinning the study, highlighting the rationale for employing a qualitative, critical ethnographic approach informed by Boal's theatre and Freirean pedagogy. By focusing to the voices of rural Black students and positioning them as active agents in the research process, the study seeks not only to generate knowledge but also to challenge systemic silences and imagine transformative possibilities within the university context. The next chapter presents the analysis of the data generated through these theatre methods, focusing on the key themes that emerged from the students' narratives and theatrical explorations.

Chapter 5

Data presentation and analysis

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents and analyses data collected from rural Black students who shared their experiences of mental wellness at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus. The analysis and discussion are primarily guided by Paulo Freire's theoretical framework, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The findings are structured around the study's three central research questions, which were designed to address the objectives outlined in Chapter One and they are designed as a thematic presentation of the data. The chapter begins by a section of detailed presentation and later discuss these findings in the second section and the last section providing conclusion and recommendations of the study.

5.2. Emerged themes from data collection

These emergent themes are directly aligned with the central focus of this study: *University of Nyisists: A theatrical investigation of Black rural students' mental wellness experiences at the university of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus (2022–2024)*. The thematic content reflects the participants' lived realities and subjective experiences as explored through theatrical methodologies. Furthermore, these themes provide critical insights into how the participants' narratives addressed and fulfilled the research objectives set out in Chapter One. They illuminate the complex interplay between institutional culture, rural identity, and mental wellness, thereby contributing meaningfully to the overarching inquiry into the psychosocial positioning of Black rural students within the university space.

5.2.1. KUNINGI!

A central theme that consistently emerged throughout the initial phase of workshopping and across all three participatory theatre-based workshops was encapsulated in the isiZulu expression *"Kuningi,"* which translates to *"there is too much"*. During the first Image Theatre workshop, participants collectively agreed on the central theme, responding to the guiding question, *"Yini eningi?"* meaning "What is more?" In response, they created a powerful image composed of multiple elements symbolizing the various factors affecting their mental wellness. Through reflection and discussion, participants unpacked the image, identifying and exploring the intensity and complexity of the issues represented.

This phrase was repeatedly used by participants as a concise articulation of the overwhelming realities they face as rural Black students navigating university life. The recurrence of this expression signifies more than a mere linguistic utterance, it symbolises a deep psychosocial burden carried by students whose lived experiences are often marked by multifaceted forms of structural, emotional, and cognitive strain. The term *Kuningi* came to represent a collective sense of distress and exhaustion. It became a thematic anchor that framed the students' narratives about their mental wellness within the institution. Participants described feeling inundated by simultaneous demands from various domains of their lives, familial, academic, interpersonal, and socio-economic. The concept of *Kuningi* meaning “it is a lot” emerged strongly, embodied in the richness and diversity of experiences portrayed. This theme is further evidenced and elaborated in the expansive range of themes that follow in the study.

Thus, *Kuningi* operates not only as a descriptor of quantity but as a qualitative measure of emotional and psychological saturation. It is a powerful conceptual lens through which the lived experiences of rural Black students can be understood, contextualized, and interpreted. The phrase encapsulates the mental toll of trying to survive, adapt, and excel in a system that remains largely unresponsive to their socio-cultural and economic realities.

5.2.2. The Burden of Origin: Rural Background and the Pressure to Succeed

An essential sub theme that emerged from participants' narratives was the psychosocial weight carried by students due to their rural upbringing. Participants constantly stressed that their rural backgrounds imposed unique and often overwhelming pressures that directly impacted their mental wellbeing. One participant reflected, *"You carry your whole village when you come here. It’s like you are not just a student; you are everyone’s hope back home."*

This sentiment reveals how students internalise the expectations of their communities, often resulting in feelings of guilt, anxiety, and an intensified fear of failure. Students articulated that they came from deeply disadvantaged socio-economic conditions. Their homes were often located in under resourced rural areas marked by high unemployment rates, limited access to quality education, healthcare, and social services, and persistent intergenerational poverty. In such contexts, their attendance at university was perceived not merely as an opportunity for individual advancement, but as a communal investment, one that held the potential to alter the socio-economic trajectory of entire families or villages.

One participant reflected *“Yabona nje mina, kusayinto enkulu kakhulu ukuhamba komuntu eye evasithi ngasekhaya futhi kuza nezinto eziningi kabi ngoba unganakile nje usuke usuyi-Role model ezinganeni eziningi emphakathini, sezibukela kuwe” “You see, being at university is still a big deal in my village, and it comes with many burdens, often without you even realising because you automatically become a role model to the young people.”*

As such, it seems the expectations placed upon them were immense. Participants shared that they were constantly reminded, directly or indirectly of their duty to “make it” at all costs. One of the participants reflected, *“I cannot afford to fail because people are watching me at home. They are waiting for me to come back with a degree, to bring change. If I fail, I fail them all.”* This sentiment was echoed by many, indicating that failure was not considered a personal setback, but a collective disappointment and, in some cases, an embarrassment to their families and communities. This expectation often translated into an internalised pressure to succeed academically and socially, even in the face of structural and institutional challenges that often worked against them.

The psychological impact of this burden was significant. Students reported feelings of anxiety, guilt, and deep fear of failure, which in turn affected their academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall mental wellness as they have articulated in discussion. The pressure to represent a "success story" from a rural area often clashed with the lived realities of navigating an alienating and competitive university environment that did not sufficiently support their transition or recognise the compounded barriers they faced. Participants further noted that there was little to no room for error or academic underperformance. The notion of having "no window to fail" was a recurring theme in the workshops. Unlike their urban counterparts, many of whom had access to financial safety nets, private mental wellness care, or academic support, rural students described how failure could mean the end of their educational journey altogether or an end to their prospective future.

In essence, the rural background of students was not just a demographic descriptor but a structural and emotional context that shaped their mental wellness in significant ways. It influenced how they experienced the university space, how they perceived themselves, and how they internalised the success-failure dichotomy. This theme reveals that for rural Black students, academic success is not just an individual goal, but a deeply politicised and emotionally anxious journey, embedded within broader struggles against historical and present-day inequalities.

5.2.3. Navigating academic pressure: Curriculum mismatch, systemic barriers, and compromised aspirations

Students highlighted the significant challenges they encountered in adapting to the university's academic environment, challenges that were often rooted in the stark disconnect between their rural educational backgrounds and the demands of a tertiary institution located in an urban context. Participants described how their prior schooling, often conducted in under resourced rural schools with limited access to 'quality' teachers, science laboratories, libraries, and digital learning technologies, left them underprepared for the academic rigor and pace of university coursework. The curriculum at university, they argued, rarely considers these disparities in educational background. As a result, many students found themselves grappling not only with complex academic content but also with the basic comprehension and communication demands of lectures delivered in English, often at a pace and in a style distant to those whose primary instruction had been in indigenous languages. One participant reflected *"Ezikoleni esiphuma kuzo thina emakhaya yonke into uyifunda ngomageba, iyona ndlela othisha ababeqinisekisa ngayo ukuthi sonke siyayizwisisa lento abasifundisa yona. KwasiNgisi leso, konke neMaths sasifunda ngesiZulu. Isingisi sifundisiwe ukusibhala kahle impela, inkinga ila ekusilaleleni nasekusikhulumeni"* *"In the schools that we come from we learned everything in our mother tongue language,* *that is the way the teachers ensured that we understood the lesson. Even the English subject and Mathematics was taught in IsiZulu. We were taught how to write in English, but the issue is to communicate in English"*

Communication barriers were a recurring concern. Student participants reported that academic language (both spoken and written) frequently became an obstacle to learning. Even as the university has acknowledged this challenge and made some attempts to address it through tutorial programmes and academic literacy initiatives such as mentorships, academic writing centres, participants argued that such interventions remain limited in scope and accessibility. One participant noted, *"Yes, there are support programmes introduced during Orientation week/weeks, but they don't reach everyone as they are not easily accessible, and by the time you fully aware about them, you've already failed your first semester."* This mismatch between institutional support and students' actual needs contributes to feelings of alienation, anxiety, and self-doubt, worsening mental wellness challenges for students who already feel marginalised within the university space. You need to speak to the strength of Drama in facilitating the process in which this perspective was discovered.

Additionally, students raised critical concerns about the relationship between academic performance and the sociocultural pressures surrounding their choice of study programmes. A deeply provocative and recurring question emerged during workshop discussions: *"Are we studying what we are passionate about, or are we studying what will get us a job?"* This question reflects the tension between personal academic interests and socio-economic necessity. Many students revealed that their degree choices were not always informed by personal ambition or intellectual curiosity, but rather by external pressures, particularly the need to secure employment and improve their families' economic conditions after graduation. This misalignment between personal passion and perceived employability not only affects enthusiasm and engagement but also has direct consequences for academic performance and mental wellbeing. Participants expressed that pursuing a field of study they are not intrinsically connected to, simply because it is regarded as a "marketable" or "important" degree, places additional emotional strain on them. Some reported feelings of disillusionment, burnout, and self-blame when they struggled academically, even though their difficulties were often the product of structural constraints rather than a lack of effort or ability.

This theme underlines that academic pressure for rural students is not limited to the volume or difficulty of academic content. It is intimately tied to systemic inequalities, language and communication gaps, limited academic support, and constrained career choice. These intersecting factors create a university environment in which rural Black students must constantly navigate disadvantage, emotionally, intellectually, and structurally.

The consequences of this academic precarity are far reaching, contributing significantly to the mental wellness challenges that these students face.

5.2.4. Institutional culture and the silencing of rural identity

Another prominent theme that emerged from the participatory workshops was the disconnection between rural students' lived realities and the dominant institutional culture of the university. Institutional culture in this context refers not only to the formal policies and academic structures of the university, but also to the informal norms, values, and practices that shape the student experience. Participants consistently described the campus environment as one that privileges urban ways of being, speaking, and knowing, often in subtle and implicit ways. This privileging manifests in classroom interactions, administrative processes, peer dynamics, and access to academic resources.

Participants expressed that their mental wellness was significantly influenced by the ways in which institutional culture reproduced feelings of exclusion, inferiority, and invisibility for students from rural backgrounds. The university, as an academic and social space, was frequently described as "not designed for us", a sentiment that encapsulates how systemic practices and symbolic norms fail to accommodate the lived experiences, linguistic backgrounds, and cultural capital of rural Black students.

Participants also reflected on how the university environment demands a form of self-presentation and competitiveness that clashes with communal, humble, and collectivist values often nurtured in rural communities. Students described feeling pressure to assimilate into a culture that prizes individualism, assertive communication, and Westernised academic norms. For many, this cultural tension contributed to identity conflict and a sense of dislocation feeling that they had to abandon parts of who they were to belong or succeed. Some though argued that even though the environment demands such, they have maintained their way of upbringing and not changed who they are *"As much as I am under the colonial structures and university modernity that I found so much confuses, I have remained intombazane yasemakhaya, true to myself and my identinty. Ngisayintombazane nje eyakhuliswa ugogo futhi ngiyaziqhenya ngalokho"* *"As much as I am under the colonial structures and university modernity that I found so much confuses, I have remained a rural girl, true to myself and my identity. I am still a girl who was proudly raised by my grandmother".*

Efforts by the institution to address transformation and diversity were acknowledged by some participants, particularly the inclusion of isiZulu signage, language policy developments, and increased representation of Black academics. However, students were critical of the superficiality of these changes, arguing that deeper cultural shifts within the curriculum, teaching methodologies, and institutional attitudes remain lacking. One student noted, *“We see posters in isiZulu, yes, but when you go to class, you still have to become someone else to be taken seriously.”* This comment underscores the gap between symbolic inclusion and substantive material transformation. This emotional toll of navigating an institutional culture that does not affirm rural identity is significant. Feelings of alienation, imposter syndrome, and cultural discord were repeatedly cited as factors contributing to stress, anxiety, and diminished mental wellbeing. For many rural students, surviving the university experience is not only about academic resilience, but also about psychological stamina in a space that subtly erodes their sense of self and belonging.

In sum, this theme illustrates how institutional culture operates as a hidden curriculum shaping which students feel at home and which students don’t, which voices are legitimised or not, and whose experiences are valued and whose are not. For rural Black students, this culture often functions as a silencing force that undermines their confidence and compounds existing barriers to success and fuels their anxiety about the present and the future.

5.2.5. Familial financial expectations and financial burdens: Navigating *Black Tax*, gender roles, and academic survival

Participants in this study consistently foregrounded the overwhelming influence of familial financial expectations and burdens on their mental wellness during university life. Central to their narratives was the notion of *Black tax*, a term widely used in South African discourse to describe the informal yet deeply entrenched expectation for Black graduates or students to financially support their families, often from limited or unstable resources. For rural Black students, this expectation is intensified by the socio-economic deprivation that characterises many of their home communities, where their enrolment in university is seen not only as a personal milestone but also as the family's long-awaited hope for economic liberation.

Students expressed a complex, and at times conflicting, relationship with *Black tax*. On one hand, many described it as an act of honour, a way to give back to the families who had sacrificed for their education. It was seen as a gesture of appreciation, a responsibility rooted in love, respect, and cultural value. Phrases like *“Babheke mina ekhaya”* (“they look to me at home”) and *“Ngiyindoda”* (“I am a man”) were frequently used to illustrate the deep sense of obligation students felt to become providers, even before securing formal employment. This was in response to the question of: “but you are still young, should you not be given the space to be young and then take on these responsibilities at a later stage?” The participants affirmed that as not being an available luxury for them. However, this sense of duty was often accompanied by immense psychological pressure. Students reported that they were expected to begin supporting their families almost immediately upon entering university, often by sharing the limited funds they received from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). In most cases, this meant sending money home for groceries, school fees, or household essentials while simultaneously trying to survive and study in a challenging university environment themselves. The expectation to be a financial pillar, despite having no formal income, placed a significant strain on their wellbeing. A few of them said they would rather go hungry in the comfort of university than seeing their families suffer in poor living conditions back home.

This disconnects between familial expectations and students lived financial realities created a sense of guilt, helplessness, and internal conflict. For many, the emotional toll of not being able to provide translated into feelings of inadequacy and failure despite their efforts to survive academically. This burden often forced students to seek part-time or informal employment, such as tutoring or retail work, in order to supplement their income and meet familial demands. These additional responsibilities, while financially necessary, detracted from their academic focus and contributed to exhaustion and declining academic performance.

The pressure to provide was also deeply gendered, particularly for male students. Within both the university and home contexts, participants spoke of how masculinity was expressed through financial provision. The cultural notion of *"Indoda must"* meaning "a man must provide" was not only reinforced by family members but also by peers and romantic partners. Male students described how maintaining romantic relationships came with the implicit expectation to spend money, buy gifts, and finance leisure activities. Those who could not meet these demands were mocked or seen as failing to perform their role as men. One participant reflected, *"Even if I don't have, I must make a plan. Because if you can't provide, then you're not a real man."* The result was that male students often found themselves in financial distress, compelled to hustle or engage inside jobs just to uphold their social status and avoid ridicule.

For both male and female students, the reality of being seen as the "hope" of the family, while still grappling with their own survival and uncertainty, was emotionally exhausting. Many reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and burnout conditions exacerbated by the lack of formal psychological support tailored to students navigating these specific financial and cultural pressures. In sum, familial financial expectations operate as both a motivating and debilitating force in the lives of rural Black students. While deeply rooted in cultural values of reciprocity and interdependence, the demands of *Black tax*, gendered provision, and communal responsibility often come into direct conflict with the developmental stage of emerging adulthood and the rigours of academic life.

5.2.6. Lack of support: Navigating institutional gaps and familial disengagement

The pervasive sense of a lack of support both from their families and from the university was another critical theme that emerged from the participants narratives. This absence of emotional, material, and structural support was reported as a significant contributor to mental distress, often leaving students feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and neglected within the academic environment.

On the familial front, students shared that while families held high expectations for academic success and future economic support, they often failed to provide the emotional support that students needed to navigate the complexities of university life. Many participants described their families as emotionally distant once they had transitioned into university, interpreting their enrolment as a sign of full independence. Students were no longer seen as individuals in need of care, but as emerging providers who were expected to survive, succeed, and eventually uplift the household. This disconnect created a psychological burden, as students were expected to perform academically under the assumption that they were coping well, when they often felt overwhelmed and unsupported. The emotional distance from home, especially when compounded by financial pressures left many without a sense of refuge or understanding from those who had previously been their primary support systems.

On the institutional level, participants were equally critical. While they acknowledged that the university promotes an image of offering various support services such as academic advising, student counselling, food parcels, and emergency aid, they argued that in practice, many of these services are inaccessible or unknown to those who need them most. A common sentiment was that “support is there, but only for those who already know how to navigate the system.” Students reported that they often did not know where to go or whom to approach when facing personal crises, such as food insecurity, a lack of toiletries, or emotional distress. For rural students unfamiliar with the administrative structure of the university, the process of seeking assistance could feel intimidating and alienating. The lack of visibility and communication around available support services was a major concern. One participant reflected, *“Sometimes we only find out about food parcels when we see other students getting them, but we don’t know where they got them from.”* This lack of accessible, transparent information seems to indicate that many suffer in silence or rely on informal networks of support, which were not always reliable or sustainable.

Another troubling concern was the perceived politicisation of support services. Students reported that certain forms of material support such as food parcels were sometimes distributed through student political organisations. While these structures were useful to some, participants felt that such systems were exclusionary and unfair, especially to those who were unaffiliated or apolitical. This often meant that access to assistance was contingent on association rather than need, further disadvantaging already vulnerable students.

Regarding academic support, students echoed similar frustrations. While the university provides academic development programmes, writing centres, and tutorial systems, these were often experienced as inaccessible due to language barriers, unfamiliar institutional language, or teaching methods that reflect Westernised academic norms. For many rural students, who may have received their prior education in indigenous languages or under less resourced conditions, these support services did not provide a culturally affirming or comfortable space. Some reported feeling intimidated by the formal settings or overwhelmed by the expectation to articulate academic challenges in English mostly in counselling sessions. This created a situation in which support mechanisms existed in theory but remained practically out of reach.

Overall, the lack of adequate, culturally responsive, and easily navigable support systems, both from families and the university was identified as a major factor undermining the mental wellness of Black rural students. The absence of proactive and accessible interventions left students feeling inadequately able to access support, within a system that often-assumed resilience without recognising the deep vulnerabilities and challenges they faced.

5.2.7. Coping strategies and their consequences on mental wellness

Participants also reported a range of coping strategies that they employ in their attempt to manage mental distress. However, while these strategies may offer temporary relief, many were described as maladaptive and ultimately detrimental to students' mental wellness and academic progression.

"Sometimes, you just want to forget everything, even just for a night. So, you drink, you smoke, you escape." A dominant coping mechanism that emerged in the workshops was substance use, particularly alcohol, often consumed in social settings influenced by peer pressure. Students described substance use as a way of "switching off" from the overwhelming psychological and emotional demands they carried daily. This form of escapism provided a temporary sense of relief, distraction, and belonging specially in peer groups where such behaviour was normalised.

However, participants reported that there is a decline in academic performance due to missed lectures, reduced concentration, and inconsistent study habits. In this case the coping mechanism employed becomes self-sabotage.

In more severe cases, students admitted to becoming dependent on substances to function socially or emotionally. This dependency often led to a cycle of underachievement, academic probation, and, in some instances, exclusion from the university to some of the close students they know. Others shared that prolonged engagement in this coping strategy significantly delayed their academic progression, forcing them to **take longer to complete their degrees**, and compounding their already existing financial and psychological burdens.

In addition to substance use, the following coping strategies were identified:

1. Social withdrawal

Some students responded to stress and anxiety by isolating themselves from social interaction. While solitude was sometimes seen as a protective measure, prolonged withdrawal resulted in increased feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and a deepened sense of not belonging. This isolation made it more difficult for students to access help or support systems that might have assisted them earlier in their struggle. The rationale here seems to be: “Hide from the world until I am better.” However, they did identify this as an unhealthy coping mechanism which seems to make sense in the moment of going through stress.

2. Overstudying

Some students attempted to cope by overcommitting to their studies. This often stemmed from internalised fears of failure or the overwhelming desire to meet family expectations. While initially productive, this strategy frequently led to burnout, physical exhaustion, and in some cases, mental breakdowns. The lack of balance between rest and academic engagement diminished their overall mental wellbeing and they seem to recognise this in hindsight through the reflective process offered by the workshop.

3. Engaging in romantic relationships for material survival

In some cases, particularly among female students, participants reported entering romantic relationships as a means of accessing material support such as food, toiletries, or weaves. While these relationships might offer short-term financial relief, they often became emotionally taxing, coercive, or even exploitative. The emotional toll of navigating such relationships under economic duress contributed to mental fatigue and feelings of low self-worth. This became the subject of exploration during the Forum Theatre Scene.

4. Suppressing emotions

Several participants reported adopting a strategy of emotional suppression, choosing not to speak about their stress, sadness, or anxiety in order to appear “strong” or “resilient.” This stoic approach was linked to cultural expectations, especially among male students, who felt pressure to maintain a façade of strength. However, this silence often masked serious psychological distress and delayed help-seeking behaviours, deepening internal suffering.

5. Relying on informal peer support networks

While informal peer support groups were sometimes helpful for emotional release and sharing experiences, they were also limited in scope. Peers were often equally overwhelmed and lacked the tools or resources to offer constructive solutions. In some cases, peer groups normalized maladaptive coping behaviours, such as excessive partying or risk-taking.

Consequences on mental wellness

Each of these coping mechanisms whether substance use, isolation, emotional suppression, or dependency on peers, contributed to a deteriorating state of mental wellness among participants. The most reported consequences included:

- Increased anxiety and depressive symptoms
- Feelings of failure and inadequacy
- Academic disengagement and poor performance
- Prolonged degree completion timelines
- Loss of motivation and hope
- Self-esteem issues and internalised stigma
- Social disconnection from both university and home environments
- Kuningi

5. 3. Summary of the data presentation

This section presented a thematic analysis of data collected through participatory workshops aimed at exploring the mental wellness experiences of Black rural students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus, between 2022 and 2024. Data was generated through interactive and reflective workshop sessions, allowing participants to articulate their lived experiences within the university space. From this process, several interconnected and deeply reflective themes emerged, shedding light on the complex realities shaping students’ mental wellness. This section revealed that the mental wellness of Black rural students is shaped by multiple, intersecting forces; structural, emotional, cultural, and economic. These themes offer critical insights into the lived experiences of a marginalised student population. The next section will give a discussion of the themes presented above, relating to the central questions, the literature reviewed and the theoretical framework of the study.

5.4. The interpretation/ discussion of the study findings

5.4.1 Introduction

This section of the chapter offers an interpretation of the emergent themes in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework grounded in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as interpreted by Ramos (1996), and the key research questions and objectives outlined in Chapter 1. Drawing from the rich, embodied data generated through theatre workshops, the themes are critically discussed to locate their meaning within the broader landscape of rural Black students' mental wellness experiences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus.

5.4.2. Discussion

The theme **"Kuningi"**, which surfaced as an emotionally charged expression throughout the workshops, is far more than a linguistic shorthand for stress; it encapsulates the layered oppressions rural Black students face within university spaces. As an embodied utterance, *Kuningi* speaks to the emotional and psychological consequences of institutional neglect, cultural erasure, and socio-economic burden, aligning closely with the critical concerns raised in the literature on mental wellness in higher education. As VanderLind (2017) argues, mental health is foundational to learning, yet it is often compromised by academic systems that fail to address students' holistic needs. This is particularly striking for rural students, who, as Pillay et al., (2020) note, contend with intergenerational poverty, educational disparities, and post-apartheid marginalization**.** The "Kuningi" condition, as described by participants, emerges as a diagnostic response to this compounded reality where academic success is demanded, yet the social, cultural, and financial support necessary for that success are absent.

The literature reveals that institutions frequently under-communicate and under-resource mental wellness services, rendering them inaccessible or irrelevant (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020; Dlamini, 2020). This aligns with how participants articulated that their pleas for help were either silenced or pathologized. The disconnect reflects what Freire (Ramos, 1996) terms the "prescription of the oppressor," wherein dominant systems define and control the limits of knowledge, wellness, and success, silencing the authentic voices of the oppressed.

Sub-themes embedded within *Kuningi* such as the burden of origin, academic pressure, financial expectations, systemic disconnection, and coping strategies reflect Freire's argument that the oppressed are dehumanized through structures that define them by their deficits (Ramos, 1996)**.** The rural background is not simply a demographic trait, but a marker of exclusion within an institution that imposes Eurocentric standards and dismisses other ways of knowing and being (Pillay et al., 2020). This pressure manifests as anxiety, perfectionism, and self-alienation, particularly as students attempt to reconcile familial responsibilities such as Black Tax and gendered expectations, with academic survival (Sabi et al., 2020; Kalenga & Mngomezulu, 2015).

Furthermore, this oppressive experience corresponds to the banking model of education, where students are treated as passive recipients of disconnected knowledge (Ramos, 1996). The curriculum mismatch, systemic barriers, and institutional culture reinforce a monologue that excludes rural students' lived realities and reinforces a silent adaptation to mental distress. *Kuningi,* then, becomes a site of awakening**,** what Ramos (1996) calls a moment of recognition of dehumanization. The theatre workshops facilitated a shift from passive suffering to critical consciousness, enabling students to interrogate, name, and perform their oppression**.**

The lack of institutional and familial support further entrenched the *Kuningi* condition. As Pillay et al. (2020) argues, rural students often navigate higher education in isolation, with fractured support networks and limited emotional resources. Within the workshops, students dramatized this gap, turning invisible struggles into visible, performative narratives. The use of Boal's Forum and Image Theatre techniques enabled students to problematize these conditions by engaging in praxis, a reflection and action toward transformation (Ramos, 1996).

Lastly, the coping strategies explored by participants ranging from emotional suppression to substance use, are reflective of internalized oppression. Ramos (1996) warns that when the oppressed lack critical engagement, they may adapt to oppression rather than resist it. Yet, through the theatre space, students began to disrupt maladaptive narratives, exploring alternative, community-rooted forms of resilience. This affirms the literature on arts-based methods as vehicles for dialogue, de-stigmatization, and mental wellness (Nicholson, 2005; Michalak et al., 2014).

To conclude, *Kuningi* is not only a thematic representation of crisis but a gateway to collective awakening. It draws together structural, emotional, and historical dimensions of oppression, providing the critical grounds on which students, through theatre, began the work of re-humanization, solidarity, and resistance, in alignment with the core objectives of this study and the emancipatory goals of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

5.5. Summary of the discussion of findings

The findings of this study illustrate that rural Black students at UKZN PMB navigate higher education under the weight of intersecting academic, financial, cultural, and emotional burdens**.** The expression **"Kuningi"** emerged as a powerful representation of this collective strain, symbolizing not only emotional exhaustion but the deeper structural forces that shape students' experiences. However, through theatre, students found a liberating space to critically engage with and confront these realities, transforming silent suffering into shared reflection and collective resistance. The theatre-based process not only surfaced distress but also opened possibilities for hope, solidarity, and alternative understandings of wellness. Although much of what emerged reflected hardship, the reflexive and creative nature of the process allowed students to identify affirming and empowering moments as well. These insights are explored further in the two themes presented below, which focus on positive and transformative aspects of student experience uncovered during the study.

5.5.1. Gratitude as resilience: Endurance, belonging, and hope.

Amidst the complex and often painful narratives of exclusion, pressure, and psychological distress, a recurring theme that emerged in the participants' reflections was a profound sense of gratitude. Despite the many structural and personal challenges associated with their journey as rural Black students in a historically exclusionary and colonial academic space, participants consistently expressed appreciation for the opportunity to access higher education. This gratitude was not naïve or dismissive of their struggles; rather, it served as a powerful form of emotional resilience, enabling them to endure and remain committed to their academic journeys.

Participants described university attendance as a privilege, something many in their communities could only dream of. For many, being the first in their families to access tertiary education was seen as both a responsibility and an honour. This awareness instilled a deep appreciation for the opportunity, even though the university space remained difficult to navigate emotionally, financially, and academically.

This gratitude was also connected to a broader narrative of hope and transformation. Students saw themselves not only as individuals seeking degrees, but as carriers of change for their families, communities, and future generations. In this way, gratitude became more than a feeling, it was a worldview grounded in a collective consciousness. The act of being present in a university space, even with all its challenges, was seen as a political and cultural assertion of *"we belong too."* This sense of belonging, even if partial or aspirational, acted as a form of psychological anchoring in the face of mental wellness struggles.

Participants also expressed courageous gratitude toward the very systems they critiqued. While they recognised that the university operates within a colonial and Western epistemic framework that often alienates and marginalises rural Black students, they also appreciated the doors it could potentially open. This duality of critique and appreciation demonstrated students' capacity to hold complexity without succumbing to defeat. As one participant powerfully articulated, *“Even if this place was not made for us, we are here now. We will make it ours. We are grateful and we are pushing.”*

Gratitude, in this context, did not reflect passive acceptance but active perseverance. It coexisted with pain, anxiety, and trauma. Students were not uncritical of the institution; they were deeply aware of its failures. But their expressions of gratitude functioned as emotional resistance against despair and disillusionment. It provided meaning amidst suffering and served as a psychological buffer against complete burnout or disengagement. Furthermore, this theme challenges dominant narratives that portray rural students solely as victims of systemic neglect. While structural inequalities and mental health stressors were clearly present, participants’ gratitude revealed narratives of strength, resistance, and survival. Their determination to endure until they fully “belong” to the academic space, despite feeling like outsiders, demonstrates a form of embodied resistance against exclusionary educational systems.

In essence, gratitude operated as both a coping mechanism and a framework of hope. It allowed students to reframe their pain and contextualise their suffering within a broader journey of transformation and self-affirmation. As such, it plays a crucial role in their mental wellness, not by erasing their struggles, but by providing the emotional stamina to continue walking through them.

5.5.2. Appreciation to *Bhincanation*: Cultural reclamation, identity affirmation, and mental wellness

A particularly unique and uplifting theme that emerged from participants' narratives was their deep appreciation for Bhincanation**,** a recent cultural and social movement on campus that has become an emblem of rural pride, collective identity, and belonging**.** Bhincanation represents more than just a group, it is a cultural expression and a symbolic resistance against the university's implicit urban-normative and Westernised value systems. Participants described how, in previous years, students from rural areas were often ridiculed for their dress, accents, mannerisms, or cultural behaviours. Wearing traditional or rural-style attire such as umblaselo, or even simple checkered shirts and plastic sandals which was often met with mockery, stereotyping, or marginalisation, particularly by urban peers. Such ridicule created psychological discomfort and further entrenched feelings of alienation and inferiority among rural students.

With the emergence of Bhincanation, a significant shift has occurred. This movement has reclaimed and revalorised rural identity as something to be celebrated rather than hidden. Students proudly display their cultural clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms. While often informal in structure, Bhincanation was widely referenced by students as a space, a style, and a sensibility through which rural-origin students affirm their identities and find solidarity in an environment that has historically othered them.

Some participants shared that Bhincanation has played a therapeutic role in their mental wellness, offering a powerful counter narrative to the dominant academic and social culture that often privileges Western standards of dress, speech, and behaviour. One participant explained, *"Now when I wear my rural clothes, umblaselo wami, I feel proud. I feel seen. Bhincanation made us realise we don't have to change who we are to be here."* Through Bhincanation, rural students find a community that affirms their worth and recognises their cultural value.

This movement also functions as a grassroots mental wellness intervention, though informal in nature. By fostering a space of cultural pride, aesthetic expression, and shared experience, Bhincanation helps students combat feelings of isolation, shame, and inferiority that often accompany rural-to-urban transitions. It provides emotional safety and cultural familiarity in an otherwise alienating academic environment. Importantly, Bhincanation does not seek validation from dominant norms; rather, it creates a parallel standard of belonging that is rooted in authenticity, confidence, and community. The psychological significance of Bhincanation is profound. Participants consistently noted that this collective identity helped restore their self-esteem, provided a buffer against discrimination and cultural erasure, and reminded them that they were not alone in their struggles. As such, Bhincanation serves as both a cultural sanctuary and a mental wellness anchor, empowering students to occupy university spaces with pride in their heritage. However, there is still a need to find culturally relevant ways of engaging and supporting students within the formal structures of the university.

In essence, Bhincanation reflects a form of cultural resistance and healing. It challenges the dominant narrative that rurality must be erased or corrected and instead offers a celebration of origin and difference. For many participants, this movement embodies a new era of student activism, one that is grounded not only in political representation but also in cultural presence, aesthetic defiance, and psychological empowerment.

Appreciation for Bhincanation is not merely about fashion or trend, it is about the reclamation of voice, space, and identity. It is a movement that contributes meaningfully to the mental wellness of Black rural students by allowing them to thrive as their full, unedited selves within an academic environment that too often demands their silence or assimilation.

5. 6. Conclusion, Recommendations and Limitations of the study

5.6.1. Conclusion

This study explored the mental wellness experiences of rural Black students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal PMB campus through the lens of applied theatre and Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed. By engaging participants in the Image and Forum Theatre workshops, the research illuminated the complex, intersecting pressures they face, captured powerfully in the phrase “Kuningi” which mirrors the definition of the word “Nyisists” that is in the title of the study. Students articulated their lived realities which confirmed the perception of UKZN and the University of Nyisist, in a way that is reflected in the realities of these rural students. The study found that the university context often reproduces oppressive structures through a curriculum and institutional culture that fails to recognise the rural student’s humanity. But, through the dialogical and embodied nature of theatre, participants were able to reflect critically on their conditions, uncover shared struggles, and reimagine possibilities for change. In doing so, the workshops became a space for both critical thinking and collective resilience.

The findings affirm Freire’s argument that liberation begins when the oppressed name their world and act upon it (Ramos, 1996). By transforming silence into speech and isolation into solidarity, rural students began reclaiming agency. This study further demonstrated dramatic processes can be used to foster cultural pride and to nurture collective identity which can be useful in producing powerful counter narratives to academic alienation. Mental wellness challenges can be overcome, but it needs to be a collective effort with multiple strategies.

This study not only adds to the growing body of knowledge on student mental wellness but also positions applied theatre as a viable and transformative methodology for education and psychosocial intervention in higher education. For institutions seeking to foster inclusion and wellbeing, the imperative is clear: to listen, to dialogue, and to act with and alongside the most marginalised.

5.6.2. Recommendations of the study

Based on the findings of this research and their interpretation through the lenses of literature, Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and the lived experiences of rural Black students, this study offers several critical recommendations. These suggestions aim to address systemic inequities, institutional silences, and socio-cultural exclusions that compromise mental wellness in the university space. The recommendations are intended to guide higher education institutions to make meaningful change in both policy and practice, particularly those like the University of KwaZulu-Natal toward more inclusive, context-responsive, and transformative practices.

Central to these recommendations is the understanding that mental wellness is not simply a personal or psychological issue, but a socio-political condition rooted in historical injustice, curriculum alienation, and structural neglect. Therefore, interventions must not only respond to immediate symptoms of distress but also dismantle the deeper causes of dehumanisation and marginalisation in university life. These proposals advocate for reforms in curriculum, student support systems, mental wellness infrastructure, and the use of culturally affirming and participatory pedagogies, including theatre.

The recommendations below reflect an urgent call for institutions to move beyond surface-level inclusion and toward structural change that acknowledges the dignity, identity, and full humanity of rural Black students. Some of these recommendations came from direct discussions with the participants. The dramatic methodology used was one that intentionally sought to engage the participants in imagining the future together as Ramos (1996) argues that the oppressed must imagine the future together. Correspondingly, Boal argues that theatre must offer a rehearsal for transformation (Jackson, 1998) and these engagements in the study affirmed that value of theatre.

(i). Institutional transformation and curriculum reform

To foster a more inclusive and humanising educational environment, universities should embed contextually relevant content into their curricula that reflect the lived experiences and realities of rural Black students. Such content promotes epistemic inclusion and affirms the cultural and social knowledge systems of historically marginalised communities. In line with the critique of the ‘banking model’ of education, there is a need to shift toward a problem-posing pedagogical approach that centres dialogue, critical thinking, and reflection. This transformative model allows students to engage meaningfully with knowledge as co-creators rather than passive recipients. To support this shift, it is essential that lecturers receive training in inclusive and decolonial pedagogies that not only validate rural identities but also challenge the hierarchical and Eurocentric assumptions that often underpin academic teaching in South African universities. However, it must be acknowledged that this recommendation is both extensive in ambition and largely external to the participants themselves. Its implementation requires systemic change at multiple institutional levels and may take many years to materialise, given the entrenched nature of traditional academic structures and curricula. Nonetheless, it remains a crucial step toward creating a learning environment that truly supports the mental wellness and academic success of rural Black students.

(ii). Mental wellness services expansion and cultural responsiveness

Mental wellness services within universities should be decentralised and made more visible by extending their presence into student residences and informal communal spaces, rather than remaining confined to formal counselling offices that are often perceived as inaccessible or stigmatising. Awareness of these services must be expanded through dynamic, peer led campaigns delivered in language accessible formats that resonate with the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the student population. Perhaps student councilors also need to come out of their offices from time to time and engage with student in groups in their own environments – hopefully to help break the stigma round seeing a psychologist. In addition, it is crucial to employ culturally responsive mental health practitioners who are attuned to the complexities of rural identity, intergenerational trauma, and the deep-seated social stigma often associated with mental illness. Such practitioners are better equipped to provide empathetic and contextually relevant care that promotes trust, engagement, and healing among rural Black students. This probably not just applicable to rural black students but township students as well who most likely share most of these challenges. There is also a need to increase the cohort of practitioners employed to deal with students' mental health issues, to help avoid the current reality of students needing to wait for months before they get help. Sometimes student issues have immense urgency and it would be beneficial if there is a way that immediate service can be provided, when necessary.

(iii). Addressing socio-economic pressures

Financial aid models should be expanded to include flexible, emergency support structures that acknowledge and address the financial realities of rural Black students, particularly the burden of Black Tax and the unpredictability of rural responsibilities such as funerals or caregiving duties. These support systems must move beyond fixed disbursement schedules and allow for compassionate, needs-based assistance during times of crisis. Universities must implement targeted interventions for food-insecure students by providing accessible and dignified resources such as discreet food banks, prepaid meal vouchers, and nutritional support schemes. Additionally, family-inclusive wellness programmes should be introduced to bridge the gap between students' academic environments and their home communities. These could include orientation sessions, language-accessible information materials, and community-based workshops that educate families about the demands of university life, thereby cultivating greater understanding, empathy, and shared responsibility in supporting students' mental wellness.

(iv). Strengthening belonging and affirmation through cultural movements

Universities should actively support and provide institutional support for grassroots movements like Bhincanation, recognising them as vital expressions of cultural affirmation, identity, and belonging for rural Black students. Such movements serve as powerful platforms for challenging dominant narratives of inferiority and promoting pride in rural heritage. To further entrench this cultural affirmation, institutions should facilitate rural student forums and integrate more cultural weeks into the academic calendar, celebrating rural languages, dress, values, and lived experiences. These events not only foster a sense of inclusion and solidarity but also contribute to the broader project of decolonising the university space by making visible and valued the traditions and perspectives historically marginalised in higher education. However, while this recommendation prioritises the voices and experiences of rural Black students, it also raises important questions about how inclusivity is defined and practiced within a diverse student population. Students who are not rural or not Black, though fewer in number, may perceive such initiatives as exclusionary or struggle to locate their own identities within the university's shifting cultural landscape. Therefore, it is essential that while affirming the rural Black identity, institutions also create space for intersectional dialogue and solidarity building across racial, geographic, and cultural lines, ensuring that transformation does not replicate new forms of marginalisation but instead invites all students into a shared, decolonial community of learning.

(v). Applied theatre and dialogical engagement

Higher education institutions should consider integrating applied theatre methodologies within student support services to create ongoing spaces for narrative healing, reflection, and transformative action. These participatory spaces help to process their mental wellness experiences communally, offering both catharsis and collective insight. Peer led performance projects exploring themes of survival, resistance, and emotional resilience can foster solidarity and reduce isolation. The university could also consider employing professionally trained Drama Facilitators who can creatively engage students on an ongoing basis, whether they are Drama Therapists or not. Additionally, theatre should be embraced as a pedagogical tool within academic development initiatives to enhance emotional learning, critical dialogue, and communication skills such as public speaking. This creative, embodied approach supports holistic student development while aligning with decolonial strategies of education and wellness.

5.7. Limitations of the study

One of the key limitations of this study is the relatively small number of participants involved in the research. The student sample does not represent a substantial proportion of the overall University of KwaZulu-Natal student population, which limits the generalisability of the findings. A broader participant base, particularly comprising more rural Black students may have provided a wider range of experiences and perspectives on mental wellness in the university context. However, the small sample size also proved beneficial in several ways. It allowed for more manageable ethical oversight, particularly in cases where sensitive content could potentially trigger emotional distress. The intimate scale of the group enabled deeper engagement, more focused discussions, and facilitated the development of rich, context specific scenarios for the Forum Theatre workshop. The reduced number of participants also allowed for more efficient data collection and analysis within the available timeframe. Despite the limited scale, this study recognises the value of each voice, whether representing a collective or an individual narrative, as meaningful and capable of contributing to broader understandings of rural Black students' mental wellness in higher education.

In closing - This study explored the mental wellness experiences of rural Black students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal PMB campus through the lens of applied theatre and Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. By engaging participants in the Image and Forum Theatre workshops, the research illuminated the complex, intersecting pressures they face, captured powerfully in the phrase "Kuningi" which mirrors the definition of the word "Nyisists" that is in the title of the study. Students articulated their lived realities which confirmed the perception of UKZN and the University of Nyisists, in a way that is reflected in the realities of these rural students. However, in spite of experiencing all these overwhelming circumstances, it was evident that mental wellness challenges can be overcome, but it needs to be a collective effort, one with multiple strategies.

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