RESEARCH ARTICLE:

A Call for the Institutionalisation of School Social Work Services in the O.R. Tambo Inland Secondary Schools to Counter the Psycho-Social ills Among Learners

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Abstract

Undeniably, learners in many secondary schools are confronted with an array of psychosocial ills that have a detrimental effect on their academic performance and overall development. This paper endeavours to delve into the ills encountered by learners in secondary schools, thereby necessitating the institutionalisation of school social work interventions in the O.R. Tambo Inland. The study adopted an exploratory and descriptive approach, aiming to explore and describe the phenomenon under scrutiny. A qualitative research methodology was employed to conduct in-depth interviews with a group of 12 learners. Furthermore, the quintet of School Governing Body (SGB) constituents actively participated in a collective discourse, constituting a focus group discussion. The empirical data were analysed thematically, with the ecological perspective and General Strain Theory (GST) being an intrinsic theoretical framework. Evidence on the ground suggests that learners are unfortunately confronted with a multitude of psychosocial ills, including but not limited to substance abuse, financial difficulties, instances of bullying, depressive symptoms, experiences of sexual abuse, and occurrences of incestuous relationships. As such, the researcher proposes that the Department of Education (DoE) should place a higher emphasis on the recruitment and deployment of social workers within schools to address the psychosocial needs of vulnerable learners effectively.

Keywords: *psycho-social; school social work; learners; governing body; multidisciplinary teams*

Introduction

School is widely acknowledged on a global, national, and regional scale as a safe learning environment (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018). In an ideal situation, the school should function as a comprehensive framework that facilitates the overall growth and advancement of learners to achieve their educational goals (O'Flaherty and McCormack, 2019). Educators exhibit a pronounced inclination towards enhancing learners' cognitive faculties, whereas school social workers adeptly attend to the intricate realm of learners' psychological and emotional exigencies. Unequivocally, the professionals are diligently and harmoniously striving towards the noble objective of ensuring the fulfilment of a fundamental constitutional right for every learner, namely, the provision of quality education within an environment that is both secure and conducive to effective learning (Piirto, 2021). Undoubtedly, school social work is internationally recognised as a field of specialisation within the profession of social work, fervently practised across numerous well-established countries, including, among others, the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and various Asian countries.

However, it is imperative to note that school social work diverges significantly when examined within the South African context. Van Sittert and Wilson (2016) postulate that the need to establish school social work in the South African (SA) education system was already recognised by the government back in 1973. However, it was only officially acknowledged as an area of specialisation by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) in 2009 (Van Sittert and Wilson, 2016). Accordingly, Van Sittert and Wilson (2016) posit that the advent of the first school social worker can be traced back to the year 1983 when the province of KwaZulu Natal assumed the vanguard position in this regard, subsequently inspiring other provinces to emulate this pioneering initiative. In

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light of the prevailing psychosocial ills encountered by learners within schools, the South African Department of Education (DoE) has astutely acknowledged the pivotal significance of social work in the scholastic milieu (Lesesa, 2022). As such, there has been a substantial surge in the number of school social workers operating within various provinces throughout the South African region over the preceding decade (Boboyi, 2024). Nevertheless, existing literature indicates that the occupation of school social workers finds its placement within the Department of Basic Education (DBE) at both the Provincial and District echelons, operating harmoniously within the overarching purview of inclusive education (van Sittert and Wilson, 2016; Vergottini and Weyers, 2020). Regrettably, there are few social workers employed within schools situated in the Eastern Cape (EC) Province, particularly in the O.R. Tambo Inland. Even a few of those employed under the School Governing Body (SGB) contract have no adequate guidance as they do not have supervisors but directly report to the school principal.

Lesesa (2022) draws attention to the fact that the Department of Social Development (DSD) has entered into a memorandum of agreement with the Department of Education (DoE) in Gauteng Province (GP) to effectively address the needs of learners in schools. Hence, it is imperative to acknowledge the paramount significance of school social workers, as they assume a pivotal position in establishing and fostering vital linkages between schools, families, and the broader societal milieu. Moreover, scholars posit that school social workers possess a distinctive and innovative vantage point when it comes to understanding learners, considering the encompassing frameworks of schools, familial dynamics, community influences, and cultural backgrounds (Dash and Mohan, 2015). Consequently, it is imperative to acknowledge that school social workers exhibit a profound commitment to the comprehensive advancement of a learner's well-being. They actively endeavour to foster societal transformation and equity within the educational milieu. In this regard, they diligently attend to the multifaceted psychosocial, emotional, and physical requisites of the learners, with an unwavering dedication to ensuring the learner's optimal welfare (Kelly *et al.*, 2015). It is safe to assert that South Africa has made progress in the development of school social work frameworks, models, and programmes to guide social workers employed by the DoE, the DSD, and various other agencies (Vergottini, 2019). This is because schools are faced with an array of dilemmas that infringe on the right of learners to education and hinder their ability to achieve their intended goals (Soliman, 2017). Instances of bullying, manifestations of school violence, cases of substance abuse, the prevalence of anxiety and depression, financial adversities, and the influence of peer pressure, among other phenomena, have unfortunately become all too prevalent within schools. Therefore, this researcher endeavours to explore and expound upon the intricate predicaments encountered by learners within schools, thereby substantiating the imperative for the institutionalisation of school social work. The ultimate objective is to bring about a paradigm shift in the scholastic milieu, one that prioritizes the optimal welfare and development of the learners.

Literature Review and Theoretical Approach

The corpus of literature presented herewith originates from eclectic contexts that encompass the multifaceted domain of learners' well-being within schools. Various scholarly resources, including articles, books, and online sources, were meticulously reviewed to effectively situate and contextualize the prevailing issues of this study.

School violence is a worldwide dilemma, but it is particularly pronounced in South Africa. Unfortunately, every day brings new headlines from a wide variety of media outlets claiming that the rate of school violence has skyrocketed to unprecedented highs. As a result, Khumalo (2019) highlights that disruptive, antisocial, and uncivil conduct constitute school violence. Regrettably, approximately 246 million schoolchildren worldwide are impacted by school violence every year (Fedotov, 2019; UNESCO, 2017). Learners have the right to an environment free of physical, sexual, and verbal abuse in schools, as enshrined by the South African Constitution (Le Mottee and Kelly, 2017). Threats of violence, emotional or psychological abuse, theft, assault, gang violence, corporal punishment, and sexual violence, among others, are all prevalent forms of school violence in South Africa (Mestry, 2015). Learners at school can be either violent victims or perpetrators. However, learner-on-learner violence accounts for the vast majority of violent incidents in schools (Khani, 2016). According to Mulvey and Cauffman (2019), some learners face school violence either at school or on their route there. Pockets of evidence further suggest that learners are victims of cyberbullying, which is a form of online violence (Chukwuere and Chukwuere, 2017). Additionally, primary risk factors for school violence in South Africa are believed to include the ready availability of weapons and high rates of violence in local communities (Leoschut and Makota, 2016). Appallingly, the future of both

teaching and learning is threatened by intermittent occurrences of school violence. As such, the rights of both learners and teachers are violated, and this quagmire must be addressed.

In another instance, school bullying is also a dilemma that is becoming a nightmare for institutions of learning everywhere (Carlton, 2017). According to Winnaar *et al.* (2018), over 246 million learners around the world are victimised by bullying each year. This mess jeopardizes a child's physical, mental, and emotional health, negatively impacting their ability to learn. Bullying in schools can take many forms, including physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, and typically occurs over a long period (Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017). Unfortunately, the problem is getting worse as many learners in South Africa are subjected to bullying, harassment, and abuse while attending school. Burton and Leoschut (2013) bring up a crucial point that schools are like little versions of the communities they're in, and the same kinds of risks that exist in their communities also raise the likelihood of violence in schools. Masilo (2018) further highlights that bullying is an issue for more than just the bully and the victim; it can affect the bully's family and friends as well as the community at large. According to a 2013 survey in South Africa by Pondering Panda, which polled 2,064 learners aged 13 to 24, an alarming 57% of South African schoolchildren are bullied, with 52% of respondents indicating they were taunted and insulted. Another 16% had encountered cyberbullying via their mobile device, computer, or online community, in addition to the 26% who had suffered physical abuse, including being shoved, hit, or beaten. Four-fifths of respondents said that pupils at their school brought weapons such as firearms, knives, and other weapons to class. Undeniably, bullying is on the rise and breaches numerous fundamental rights for learners. Thus, school social workers can play a crucial role in the school environment to bridge a gap and raise awareness of the consequences of bullying. Furthermore, school social workers may work with teachers in developing prevention strategies to mitigate the challenges associated with bullying.

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa has faced numerous socioeconomic issues, including high unemployment, poverty, social inequality, and limited access to public services (Mamokhere, 2020). These obstacles continue to impair the quality of life for many South Africans. While South Africa is a developing country, education must be a key priority for the country's development (Rieckmann, 2017). Indeed, as Nelson Mandela emphasised, a decent education can aid in improving human conditions and contribute to the economy. Even though education is a crucial aspect and plays a part in economic development, it is not without its difficulties. According to the findings of Parrett and Budge (2020), learners living in poverty encounter far more dilemmas than their peers, and yet they are often the most diligent learners. In addition, low-income families are less likely to afford good nourishment and may lack basic household amenities, which might affect a child's academic performance (Kapinga, 2014). Due to a lack of financial education and poor income, cases of families sending their children to school without food are not uncommon (Kapinga, 2014). Moreover, learners living in poverty may have fewer resources at home to finish homework, study, or participate in activities that prepare them for academic success during the school day (Cooper and Stewart, 2021). Evidence also suggests that many low-income households lack access to computers, high-speed internet, and other resources that can assist a learner outside of the school premises (Dube, 2020). This is why the majority of learners from low-income homes are reported to receive lower or average grades and to have low self-esteem (Ho *et al.*, 2015). In addition, their higher-income contemporaries surpass them in academics and sports, to mention just a few (Ho *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, learners from low-income homes are more likely to quit school, as many government schools fail to provide adequate support and high-quality education. In addressing this issue, the role of a school social worker can bridge a significant gap as they are trained to handle such cases.

Furthermore, adolescent mental health issues are a major focus of international media coverage because they affect many children and young people in underdeveloped countries, South Africa included (Mfidi, 2017). Many children face challenges that might lead to mental health issues. Furthermore, the same mental health problems that impact adults can also affect children, but typically in different ways (Orben *et al.*, 2020). Mfidi (2017) estimates that 20% of children and adolescents may encounter mental health challenges throughout their lifetime. These difficulties manifest themselves in social, emotional, and behavioural ways. Consequently, there is mounting evidence that children experiencing mental health problems are also more prone to exhibit behavioural changes (Imran *et al.*, 2020). Anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and attention deficit disorder (ADD) are among the most frequently seen mental health issues in South African classrooms (Ward *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, studies have shown that certain mental disorders often show their first symptoms in childhood (Merikangas *et al.*, 2009). Early exposure to adversity, such as domestic violence, maltreatment, home stress or trauma, poverty, and poor nutrition, is a risk factor for mental health disorders (Nelson *et al.,* 2020). Having

these mental health problems raises the odds that a child may struggle in school and have a lower-than-average quality of life overall. Thus, professionals such as school social workers, registered counsellors, and the school may work as a multidisciplinary team in addressing mental health problems.

This study is predicated on the ecological perspective framework. According to the ecological worldview, the complex interplay of psychological, social, economic, political, and physical forces is the basic underpinning for explaining human problems (Moon *et al.*, 2010; Pardeck, 1988). Given that learners' emotional and psychological difficulties at school may result from intertwined factors in their immediate surroundings, this theory is particularly pertinent (Piel *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the ecological approach offers strategies that help school social workers shift from providing direct services to addressing societal issues at larger scales (Moon *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, the research shows that this viewpoint aids the practitioner in making an impact on a client system not only through macro-level activities like policy and planning but also through micro-level procedures like psychotherapy (Boetto, 2016). Therefore, when dealing with a client system, an ecological approach allows for the integration of direct and indirect practice techniques for intervention into a coherent practice orientation (Boetto, 2016). School social workers can use this understanding within the context of the study to design creative programmes that meet the needs of learners, families, schools, and communities.

Central to the study is school violence. Thus, Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) is germane to the study. The GST posits that individuals are likely to be involved in deviant behaviour because of their negative emotions and experiences, especially when they perceive that there is a gap between their expectations and reality, and when they experience strain or stress (Agnew and Brezina, 2019). In the context of the study, the GST is adopted to comprehend how the strains and stressors experienced by learners contribute to a wide range of problems, such as academic challenges, behavioural issues, and emotional distress. The existence of school social work in schools can be considered as a mitigating factor to reduce the strains that learners may experience by providing support systems and interventions to address the challenges that learners may face.

Methodology

This research is grounded in the interpretive paradigm because it offers a subjective account of the psycho-social ills that secondary school learners face and necessitates school social work services. In other words, the research focuses on learners' perspectives as a means of comprehending the real world. The nature of this empirical study is exploratory and descriptive. However, phenomenology is the chosen design for the study. Phenomenology seeks to comprehend the subjective concepts, thoughts, and ideas that give meaning to the structure of diverse sorts of experiences (Creswell *et al.*, 2020; Fouche, 2011). Thus, the psycho-social ills of learners were articulated and investigated to establish the need for school social work. The qualitative research method is appropriate for this study since it focuses on examining, describing, and offering a comprehensive understanding of human experiences (Brink *et al.*, 2018). The study employed non-probability sampling through the purposive sampling technique as part of its qualitative sample techniques. This sampling strategy, according to Bless *et al.* (2013), is based on the researcher's opinion regarding the features of a representative sample. As such, 12 learners from a designated school were selected with the support of the school's principal. The study underlined the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participant selection. The most important condition was working with grade 12 learners, who are regarded to have a deeper understanding of the issue under investigation. The focus group discussion included 5 members of the School Governing Body (SGB) to gain their professional perspective on psycho-social ills encountered by learners.

Qualitative research collects empirical data using a range of methods. Authors, such as Renjith *et al.* (2021), hypothesize that participant observation, interviews, and focus group discussions are the most often employed qualitative data-gathering techniques. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to determine the ills faced by secondary school learners. Thematic analysis is one of the most popular methods for analysing data in qualitative research, and it is employed in this study. Clarke and Braun (2021) state that, on a fundamental level, this method is for constructing, evaluating, and understanding patterns throughout a dataset, and incorporates rigorous data coding methods to produce themes. As a result, themes formed and were thematically explored to contextualize the psychosocial challenges faced by learners at one of the selected secondary schools in the Eastern Cape, O. R. Tambo Inland. Ethics-related concerns, according to Kang'ethe *et al.* (2022), are regulations and specific safety precautions that researchers follow before and during research endeavours. By ethical

considerations, the researcher sought approval to conduct the study and received a letter of goodwill from the targeted school and approval from the DoE. With the assistance of the school gatekeeper and the mediator, the selected participants signed the informed consent documents. To respect the participants' right to privacy, the study preserved confidentiality and anonymity. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were informed they could quit at any time without being questioned or criticised. In instances where participants were triggered due to the sensitivity of the study, the researcher was in a position to provide counselling as a qualified and registered social worker.

Findings and Discussions

Table 1: Demographic profile of learners

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Nationality	Grade
Learner 1	18 years	Female	South African	12
Learner 2	18 Years	Male	South African	12
Learner 3	18 Years	Female	South African	12
Learner 4	18 Years	Male	South African	12
Learner 5	18 Years	Female	South African	12
Learner 6	19 Years	Male	South African	12
Learner 7	19 Years	Female	South African	12
Learner 8	18 Years	Female	South African	12
Learner 9	18 Years	Male	South African	12
Learner 10	18 Years	Female	South African	12
Learner 11	20 Years	Male	South African	12
Learner 12	18 Years	Male	South African	12

Table 2: Demographic profile of the SGB members (Focus group)

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Nationality	Position
SGB 1	49 Years	Male	South African	Principal
SGB 2	43 Years	Female	South African	Life orientation teacher
SGB 3	37 Years	Female	South African	Teacher
SGB 4	54 Years	Male	South African	School disciplinary committee member
SGB 5	23 Years	Female	South African	Student social worker

This study was carried out in a public school in Mthatha, O. R. Tambo District Inland, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Demographic details are included in Tables 1 and 2. Column 1 of both tables depicts aliases of the individuals who partook in the study. Because of this, participants signed informed consent documents after being fully briefed on the aim of the study. The ages of learners and focus groups are listed in the second column in Tables 1 and 2, which detail the average age of learners who participated in the study, the same with SGB members. Forms requesting parental permission were made available for minors. However, all the participants were over the age of 18 years. More so, adults over the age of 18 made up the focus group. According to the 2018 edition of the South African Education Statistics, grade 12 is the final year of secondary education. The term "matriculation" tends to be used more often. On average, South African secondary school seniors are between the ages of 18 and 19 (Spaull, 2013). The researcher made sure there was no gender bias by interviewing male and female learners equally. There were 60% women and 40% men in the focus group discussion. As can be seen from Table 1 and Table 2, all of the participants were South Africans.

Learners' grades and focus group occupations/positions are displayed in Tables 1 and 2's fifth column. They were all 12th graders. As can be seen in Table 2, four out of the five people who participated in the focus group were a teacher component of the SGB, one being the parent component of the SGB. Table 3 presents and discusses a theme of psycho-social ills confronted by learners in a selected school in the O. R. Tambo Inland. The researcher probed to get in-depth information from learners and SGB members.

Table 3: Psycho-social ills encountered by learners in secondary schools

Theme	Sub-theme	Probes/Categories
Psycho-social ills encountered by learners in secondary schools	Social ills	Substance abuse Financial problems Bullying

	Psychological ills	Depression Incest and sexual abuse

Substance abuse

Learners affirmed that substance abuse is the most pervasive social problem in their schools. In addition, the learners revealed that there is a cricket field within the school dubbed "Jamaica" where all these sorts of drugs and alcohol are used, drugs like marijuana, space muffins, nyaope, lin, candy, and liquor to mention a few. Correspondingly, the focus group also concurred that there is an epidemic of substance use in their school. These findings illustrated the comments below:

> Learner 2: "… t*he drug use is very high, our cricket ground is no longer used for cricket but is now called Jamaica because that is where drugs are used."*

> Learner 4: *"Eish! The challenge we are facing as students is substance abuse, and some of the students would influence us to smoke as well."*

> Learner 1*: "… well for me, I think drugs and peer pressure are a serious problem in our school."*

> Learner 3: *"I think there are so many challenges we are faced with, we have a drug problem in this school"*

The focus group verbalised the following comments:

> *"Substance abuse is the most reported problem, however, this has always been a serious problem ever since I came to this school. The learners come to school under the influence of drugs, misbehave and disrespect teachers. These are serious problems that need to be addressed."* (SGB 1).

> *"As a DC member of the school, we receive reports about drugs used by learners in the school, and we put up the uptight punishment to make sure that the learner does not come to school drunk or smoked and even expel them in serious cases."* (SGB 4).

> *"Our children more especially boys become problematic when they come from initiation school, you wonder if they are being taught smoking and alcohol or manhood. Our men seem to fail our children because they become worse when they come back and regard themselves as men and disrespect female teachers at school."* (SGB 2).

> *"I'm a student social work intern for six months, assisting the life orientation teacher who is responsible for these challenges. We experience substance abuse a lot and I believe that there should be measures to be taken to prevent this problem."* (SGB 5).

Tshitangano and Tosin (2016) posit that the phenomenon of adolescent substance misuse has garnered significant recognition as a prominent social, political, and scientific concern spanning numerous decades. The rationale behind this assertion stems from the inherent health risks, both immediate and prolonged, that are intrinsically linked to the utilisation of tobacco commodities, narcotic substances, and cannabis (commonly referred to as dagga). In light of prevailing evidence, it is imperative to acknowledge the intricate association between adolescent substance abuse and deleterious health ramifications, as well as the consequential perturbation it engenders within the societal fabric (Tshitangano and Tosin, 2016). The intricate web of interconnections between various phenomena such as accidents, cancer, murder, suicide, depression, personality disorders, unintentional sexual encounters, and sexually transmitted diseases has been meticulously elucidated in the scholarly discourse on substance abuse (Onrust *et al.*, 2016). In a parallel vein, it is imperative to acknowledge that substance abuse exerts a deleterious influence on the economic fabric of a nation, as it engenders a confluence of predicaments, including but not limited to the escalation of youth unemployment, the proliferation of criminal activities, and the exacerbation of poverty levels. Hence, this observation underscores the imperative of proactively mitigating the prevalence of substance abuse within the adolescent demographic. School social workers possess a comprehensive skill set that enables them to effectively address such instances. Consequently, it is prudent to foster collaboration among various multidisciplinary teams, including but not limited to the South African Police

Services (SAPS), teachers, school social workers, and SGB members, to collectively enhance awareness about substance abuse.

Financial problems

Learners stated that they are experiencing financial difficulties back home. This is because most of these learners hail from disadvantaged backgrounds. Unfortunately, they struggle to cover their school fees and boarding costs. The participating school is a boarding school, therefore fees and housing are required. However, 40% of participants indicated that they are not experiencing financial difficulties. Perhaps this is because the school welcomes everyone regardless of their background. Also, the Eastern Cape government has assumed responsibility for assisting learners in need through various programmes. Further, few learners, according to the focus group, can meet their fundamental needs; nevertheless, the school has progressive programmes and budgets to assist those recognised as requiring care. These programmes supply schools with shoes, uniforms, and school stationery. However, the principal did add that the lack of a nutrition programme at their schools, unlike other schools, is also an issue. Below are the responses from learners:

> "*Last year I lost my father who was supporting my family as a result I had financial problems when I had to pay my fees because he was the provider of my family. My mother was not working and we struggled because it took so long for my mother to get the money that my father invested* (teary)." (Learner 5).

> Learner 7: "*… we are struggling with finances and substance abuse and major depression.*"

> "*The challenge I am facing is a financial problem, my parents both passed away, so I had a very disturbing upbringing*" The aunt that raised us was abusing alcohol and would insult me when she was drunk and make me clean the house. I sometimes had to privately ask for money from other relatives to be able to buy cosmetics and other stuff." (Learner 8).

The focus groups revealed that:

> "*We do have learners coming from poor backgrounds, however, we are parents at the end of the day. We live in a society where a neighbour's child is yours and theirs yours. And, of course, we are Africans, Ubuntu is what made us who we are today. I as an individual take responsibility when there is a need and as a head, you need to ensure that your children are happy and academically performing well. Even though it is not easy for learners to disclose their problems we have a minimal number of learners struggling financially.*" (SGB 1).

> "*Some of these learners benefit from social grants, which truly aids a lot to cover up a lot of things, Social development assists us a lot when it comes to food parcels as we sometimes refer those identified learners with financial problems to Social development.*" (SGB 2).

> "*As a student social worker working with the school as an intern, we do not do much of casework, however, serious cases are referred to relevant stakeholders. Below 18 years learners in need of care and protection are referred directly to Social development. The challenge is when a learner is above 18 years of age.*" (SGB 5).

> "*As parents, we have so many responsibilities! We are guardians, and some of the parents of these children are not working and depend on our old age grant. Others go to work in Johannesburg and disappear forgetting that they have children. And some of these children do not have parents. It becomes difficult for us to use the same old age grant for expensive uniforms, buy them food and give them money for transport.*" (SGB 4).

Shange (2018) substantiates the empirical evidence that learners and schools situated within socioeconomically disadvantaged communities encounter a multitude of challenges including fiscal constraints, dearth of educational resources, dilapidated infrastructure, insufficient teaching personnel, and inadequate provision of pedagogical excellence. Henceforth, it is imperative to acknowledge that in times of economic distress, the repercussions are felt ubiquitously, permeating the very fabric of society. Consequently, as financial resources become scarce and the circulation of monetary funds diminishes, schools find themselves confronted with an imminent dearth of fiscal support, thereby precipitating a dire budgetary predicament (Panayotou, 2016). Regrettably, as a consequence of

constrained financial resources allocated to educational institutions, certain schools find themselves unable to provide adequate support to learners who are encountering difficulties (Legotlo, 2014). Educators and educational administrators ought to diligently endeavour to cultivate a heightened state of consciousness among their learners, thereby ensuring that these learners are provided with the requisite assistance and are afforded an equitable opportunity to achieve scholastic triumph. Moreover, it is imperative for educational administrators to proactively pursue external funding opportunities to establish a robust cadre of social workers within schools. Additionally, a concerted effort must be made to devise a sustainable and reliable mechanism for financial support, thereby ensuring the perpetual provision of these invaluable services.

Bullying

Bullying is one of the challenges faced by learners. Participants confessed that they were bullied when they were new to the school because they did not know anyone and had no friends. However, 50% of other participants mentioned that they did not experience bullying of any sort. The following are responses by learners about bullying:

Learner 10: *"Firstly, the thing of not knowing people in school as a first entering student was a great challenge for me, having to adapt to a new environment was not easy, I was being bullied by boys."*

Learner 9: *"One of the nightmares I dealt with at school was being bullied by friends I made when I got to XX School".*

Learner 5: *"… I was also bullied by boys because I was dedicated to my studies and doing well in class, they got jealous and would take my belongings during breaks at school and steal my lunch".*

"I experienced bullying in my first year because of my personality. I have a soft voice by nature and boys would say I am "isitabane" (gay) because I am not like them and that broke my heart and affected my academic performance." (Learner 12).

The focus group conceded that:

"We haven't received many reports of bullying, however, the recent incident was of a learner who was being called funny names by other learners like "isistabani", moffie, gay and so on and those learners were dealt with. It never really came to our attention that learners bully each other." (SGB 1).

The findings suggest that there is an issue of bullying in school, even though some occurrences are not reported. Similarly, a 2013 survey in South Africa by Pondering Panda interviewed 2,064 learners aged 13 to 24, finding that an alarming 57% of South African schools are bullied, with 52% of respondents reporting they were ridiculed and humiliated. While schools are often depicted as "breeding grounds of bullying," Divecha and Brackett (2020) argue that substantial data showing that aggression is taught at home and indicating that one who is bullied at home is likely to become a perpetrator of bullying at school. Thus, social workers must be part of the school system to address issues related to bullying.

Depression

The majority of the participants reported that they were suffering from major depression and anxiety and attended a psychological assessment at the academic hospital in Mthatha. However, 30% of participants reported that they hadn't experienced depression. The following are the responses from learners:

"Okay, sir! I hope you will not judge me but I will be honest with you (laughs). I had a boyfriend when I was doing grade 10 and he's an older guy and doing his final year of medicine at WSU. He is so abusive and I have a baby with him. Honestly, I love him but I always feel I am not good enough for him, Yes men cheat but he is overdoing it now. So I have self-diagnosed myself that I am depressed and sometimes experience anxiety. I am trying to pass my grades but "ndiyagowa shame amadoda azosibulala" (I am not coping, boys will kill us one day)." (Learner 1).

> Learner 10: *"I am struggling with finances and substance abuse and I was diagnosed with major depression."*

> Learner 6: *"I never experienced depression and I think that's a disorder for rich people (laughing)."*

> *"I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety when my parents separated and eventually divorced. I am attending sessions with my psychologist at XX Hospital. I am better now but honestly, I was not coping. As a result, I would not attend school and do tasks because I was not always at school. But the principal understood and supported me throughout the journey."* (Learner 7).

The school principal however posited that:

> SGB 1: *"Learners are suffering from depression in school for various reasons. However, those learners are attended by the Departmental Psychologist since many parents cannot afford to pay Psychologists".*

According to the estimations put forth by Mfidi (2017), it is postulated that a noteworthy proportion, specifically 20%, of young people will encounter challenges to their mental well-being throughout their existence. The extant body of evidence additionally posits that the onset of depression may manifest during the formative years of childhood in certain instances, particularly when the child exhibits a proximate kinship with individuals of consanguineous lineage who themselves grapple with depressive symptoms. The manifestation of depression is evident across various domains, including but not limited to social, emotional, and behavioural spheres. Consequently, a burgeoning body of evidence suggests a positive correlation between childhood mental health afflictions and the manifestation of behavioural alterations (Imran *et al*., 2020). The treatment modalities employed to address these challenges encompass pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy, with social workers being highly proficient practitioners who are adept at navigating these concerns, particularly within educational environments.

Incest and sexual abuse

Half of the learners reported that they have experienced sexual abuse and rape by their cousins. Incest is regarded as sexual relations between people classed as being too closely related (Kresanov *et al.*, 2018). 50% of participants however postulated that they have not experienced incest and sexual abuse. However, they have heard of their friends being victims of sexual violence in schools. The principal indicated that most learners are sexually abused by their stepparents, uncles, cousins, partners, and even their teachers. The following are the verbatims by learners:

> Learner 3: *"Well, to be honest, I am a victim of rape. I was raped by my cousin, he took advantage of me because I was a quiet and shy person. This has been happening for quite some time but I told my mom and he denied it".*

> *"I was sexually abused by my boyfriend who was doing his practicals here at school. I found out he was dating and sleeping with other girls in other grades. I fought with one of the girls because she was disrespecting and badmouthing me."* (Learner 5).

The focus group said:

> *"Learners do get sexually abused, sodomised and experience incest. We have received many reports of learners sexually abused by their loved ones, and boys sodomised by their male cousins and even promiscuous teachers. And we refer those cases to the Social development department and psychologists."* SGB 1).

The data about the learners' information aligns with the feedback received from the focus group's participants. Even though half of the participants attested to not having experienced instances of sexual violence about incest, the focus group posited that they are consistently inundated with a multitude of allegations concerning sexual abuse and incestuous acts. This phenomenon may be attributed to the courageous disposition of certain learners who undertake the arduous task of unveiling instances of abuse, juxtaposed against the perilous circumstances faced by their counterparts who encounter grave threats to their lives from the very perpetrators should they dare

to disclose any transgressions perpetrated against them. As per the scholarly work of Hughes (2020), it is evident that instances of sexual violence are pervasive within society. Instances of sexual violence, encompassing acts such as rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, molestation, as well as sexual harassment within professional settings or other communal spheres, have been observed to elicit profoundly elevated levels of traumatic stress within the population of educational beneficiaries (Hughes, 2020).

Conclusion

The empirical evidence presented in this study demonstrate the existence of significant gaps related to the psychological and social well-being of learners. The extant challenges prevalent within schools necessitate a steadfast dedication from the Department of Education (DoE) and other pertinent stakeholders. A renowned clinical psychologist once articulated that if was he afforded the opportunity to re-select his domain of expertise, he would unequivocally opt for educational psychology. Suggesting that it is imperative to invest our collective energy towards the cultivation of younger people, thereby effectuating a transformative impact upon their lives, with the aim of nurturing a robust and well-balanced human being. In light of the aforementioned discussion, the researcher proffers the subsequent recommendations:

- The DoE must prioritise employing school-based social workers to deal with these issues flooding schools.
- Stakeholders such as South African Police Services (SAPS), DSD, The Department of Health, and other agencies must collaborate as a multidisciplinary team to address the psycho-social ills encountered by learners in schools.
- The involvement of parents is imperative, and school social workers are in a better position to develop parenting programmes that will equip parents to do parenting effectively.

The study aimed to better understand and characterize the psycho-social ills that learners experience in secondary schools. It is undeniable that an array of challenges prevents learners from reaching their full potential. It is regrettable that even after the dawn of democracy in South Africa, schools are still prone to violence, bullying, depression, financial problems, and substance abuse. These ills have a detrimental impact on learners' overall development. More so, the learner's bill of rights to education delivered in a safe and conducive environment is violated. Therefore, school social workers can play an essential role in a child's development since they focus on learners' often-overlooked psycho-social needs.

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