Assessing the imperative for school social workers: insights from principals and circuit managers in Mankweng circuit, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This research study investigated the critical role of school social workers within the educational landscape of Mankweng Circuit, South Africa. School social workers play a pivotal role in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by students, their families, and school communities. Through a qualitative research approach, we conducted in-depth interviews with principals and circuit managers to explore their perspectives on the role of school social workers in promoting holistic student development, improving school climate, and addressing socio-emotional barriers to learning. The findings uncover the multifaceted challenges faced by school social workers, including limited resources, high caseloads, and the need for ongoing professional development. The implications of this research are significant, shedding light on the critical need for recognizing and investing in the roles of school social workers in South African education. The insights gained from this study can inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in the field of education on the imperative of integrating school social workers into the educational system as vital contributors to the overall success and well-being of students. Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on strengthening the educational support system in South Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Assessing, Imperative, School Social Workers, Principals, Circuit Managers

JEL Classification: O35; H19

Introduction

Children are recognized as a vulnerable demographic requiring specialised attention and protective measures. This safeguarding is enshrined in various legislative instruments, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South Africa, 1996), the Children's Act 38 of 2005, the Child's Justice Act 75 of 2008, and the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. In the pursuit of safeguarding children's best interests, it is imperative to consider and preserve their fundamental human rights, particularly when making decisions pertaining to their well-being. Within this context, education is firmly established as a fundamental human right for children. Consequently, the best interests of a child encompass the provision for their physical, emotional security, intellectual, social, and cultural development (Reyneke, Jacobs 2018).

The need for school social workers in South Africa emerged as a response to the burgeoning legislative framework designed to balance the educational and social facets of children's lives. This recognition took root in the late 1940s when it was acknowledged that schools were grappling with various social welfare challenges (Kasiram, 1988 & Swart, 1997). In 1948, the Transvaal and Natal education departments appointed special teachers to address these pressing social welfare needs within schools (Rocher, 1977 & Western Cape School Social Work Forum, 1995). Building on this foundation, the Department of Education in South Africa considered social work services in schools as an essential component in the 1970s (Rocher, 1988; Swart, 1997 & SACSSP, 2010). Subsequently, numerous South African and international researchers, including those from countries like Zimbabwe, have consistently underscored the indispensability of school social workers within the education system. Consequently, it becomes evident that the role and significance of social workers in schools cannot be dismissed (Le Roux, 1987; Kasiram, 1988, 1993; Swart, 1997;...
Kemp, 2014 & Huxtable, 2016). The objective of this paper appears to be to highlight the importance of school social workers in South Africa, especially in the context of safeguarding children's rights and well-being.

This paper discusses the legal and legislative framework that recognizes children as a vulnerable demographic and outlines their rights. It also traces the historical development of the need for social workers in South African schools, dating back to the late 1940s. The central argument of the paper seems to be that school social workers play a critical role in addressing the social welfare needs of students within the education system.

The paper emphasises that social workers’ presence is essential to ensure the holistic development and well-being of children, encompassing their physical, emotional security, and intellectual, social, and cultural development. The historical context provided suggests that this recognition of the role of social workers in schools has a long-standing and well-documented history in South Africa. In summary, the paper aims to advocate for the importance of school social workers in South African education, emphasising their role in promoting and protecting the best interests of children in line with the legal and legislative framework. School social workers provide consultation and training to administrators and school personnel related to the whole child, including behaviour and classroom management, mental health, child abuse, and neglect, and other crises.

**Literature Review**

The following section delves into scholarly literature in alignment with the study's objectives. This literature review encompasses global, continental, national, and local perspectives. Present-day children are increasingly ensnared by a multitude of societal issues and influences that detrimentally impede their capacity as learners. Families are in a perpetual state of flux, and until they attain stability in any form, the unaddressed physical, emotional, and psychosocial needs of children will persistently disrupt their aptitude to engage, concentrate, and adapt within an educational environment (Boakye & Ampiah, 2017). This section's focal point is to furnish a comprehensive account of the historical and local evolution of school social work, along with an exploration of the challenges confronted by both students and educators within the school setting. Additionally, it investigates the specific roles that social workers within schools can assume.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

**Social Work**

According to the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) (2021), Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to social work.

**School Social Worker**

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2021), School Social Workers are an integral link between schools; home and community in helping learners achieve academic success. They work directly with school administrators as well as learners and families providing leadership in forming school discipline policies, mental health intervention, and crisis management and support services. As part of the multidisciplinary team to help learners succeed, school social workers facilitate community involvement in schools while advocating for learners’ success.

**Child Rights**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) outlines the fundamental rights and freedoms that every child is entitled to, including the right to life, survival, and development, protection from violence, and participation in decisions that affect them (UNICEF, 2019).

**Child Welfare**

Child Welfare refers to the well-being of children and encompasses a range of services, policies, and practices designed to support and promote their safety, permanency, and overall development (Wulczyn et al, 2017).

**Child protection**

UNICEF uses the term ‘child protection’ to refer to prevention and response to violence, exploitation and abuse of children in all contexts. This includes reaching children who are especially vulnerable to these threats, such as those living without family care, on the streets, or in situations of conflict or natural disasters (UNICEF, 2019).

**A brief global perspective on the development of social work**

School Social Work was first implemented in the U.S.A. in 1906 and was an established field of practice in at least 20 countries, including Eastern Europe and East Asian countries by 1977 (Kelly, 2008; Huxtable, Blyth, 2002 & Dutil, 2020). In the academic literature of scholars ranging from the late 1970s to more recent sources, there is broad agreement on the causes that led to the creation of school social work (Rein,1970, Flexner, 2001 & Horner et al., (2020). For instance, Kelly (2008) attributed the emergence of School Social Work (SSW) to the necessity for improved communication between key stakeholders in the field of children's education.
within New York, Boston, and Hartford, Connecticut. Likewise, Huxtable and Blyth (2002) pointed to the initiatives undertaken in these three urban centres as the driving force behind the formation and expansion of School Social Work.

The Woman's Education Association in Boston developed a home and school visitor in one of the city's schools to ensure a stronger connection between home and school. In Hartford, the first visiting teacher's program was established, which is now known as School Social Workers (Case Western Reserve University, 2010). Two social settlements in New York provided immediate impetus by assigning visitors to school districts so that the settlement house and staff could keep in closer contact with the teachers of the children who lived in the settlement neighborhood (Case Western Reserve University, 2010; Huxtable & Blyth, 2002).

Fink (1974) attributed the development of SSW to activities that took place in New York, Boston, and Hartford at different times. Sabatino et al. (1991) interpreted the simultaneous emergence of these social inventions to point to a common cultural substrate that these cities shared. Staudt et al., (1995) suggested that these social projects were in response to common underlying conditions, needs, or socio-political developments in these cities. The adoption of compulsory school attendance regulations and child labour restrictions in several states, for example, is regarded to have aided these attempts that eventually led to the establishment of school social work (Sabatino et al., 1991; Staudt et al., 1995). Fink (1974) argued that the antecedent conditions of the culture at the time prepared the way for the establishment of SSW rather than the practice of social support at schools resulting from or in response to needs. Traditionally, school social workers were thought to act as liaisons between the home, school, and community.

Since 1907 school social workers have worked more closely with teachers and other school officials to further educational goals (Rocher, 1977; 1988). School social workers were also known as attendance officers, as they were in charge of enforcing compulsory school attendance. Sabatino et al. (1991) described SSWs’ primary job as a home-school liaison, in addition to assisting with other social maladies like community, Poverty in the neighbourhood, ill health, and other variables all had an impact on school attendance. The focus of school social workers' services shifted as the number of school social workers grew over the decades, and these shifts were paralleled by societal factors (Case Western Reserve University, 2010).

In the 1940s, the first SSWs were appointed in Canada, Norway, and Sweden (Huxtable & Blyth, 2002). Municipalities and parent organisations in Stockholm were the first to establish social work positions in high schools. During the 1970s, the Finnish school social work system began to spread (Huxtable & Blyth, 2002). In 1977, Finland had 85 school social workers, and by 1993, 220 in a total of 93 municipalities. Since then, the number of school social workers has grown to almost 1,500, with about 50 in Denmark and 80 in Norway. School social work dates back to 1970 in Germany and Hong Kong, to assist children with emotional and social issues (Huxtable & Blyth, 2002). There were 93 student guidance officers serving 477 primary schools in Hong Kong in the early 1980s, and another 91 social workers serving 297 secondary schools (Hong Kong Government, 1982 in Huxtable & Blyth, 2002). Prior to 1997, school social work was practiced in Argentina's Buenos Aires Province and the Capital District under the job title of school social worker, where they held both a social work degree and a teaching certificate in basic education (Huxtable & Blyth, 2002). Since 1997, all primary and special education schools in the province of Buenos Aires have had at least one school social worker.

The number of social workers is determined by a formula that calls for one social worker for every 500 primary school students and one for each special education school. If they serve a large number of pupils who are at risk, schools with more than 1,000 students have two school social workers. The severity of what school social workers offer has been justified with this allocation, which includes a range of care, counselling, and counselling for families and youth (Thyer & Myers, 2007). Huxtable and Blyth (2002) expressed optimism about school social work in the twenty-first century since school social workers around the world know systems, individuals, groups, relationships, organisations, and theories of change, and as a result, the profession will grow. According to Rocher (2011), an increase in school social workers must maintain an emphasis on working with the school, family, and community, and the type of services should include a strong preventative strategy. Huxtable and Blyth (2002) concluded that SSWs will be the leaders needed to enable changes in preparing children, families, schools, and communities for a fast-changing world.

The history of school social work in Africa

The beginning of social work in Africa in general and Ghana in particular can be traced to the activities of three major groups: Christian missionaries, voluntary agencies, and tribal societies (Huxtable & Blyth, 2002). These organisations, in collaboration with ethnic communities, founded several charities for low-income families. The Colonial Development Act of 1940 gave the social work profession official status, marking its move from the private sector to the federal government (Huxtable & Blyth, 2002). Since Ghana's independence, social work practice has undergone numerous structural changes, as well as increased, expanded, and taken on new dimensions. For several decades, social science academics in South Africa advocated for the appointment of social workers in schools. At present, the need for school social workers has been underscored due to the increase of social problems within communities impacting children with more than one problem (WCED, 2010).

In the late 1940s, the necessity for social work in schools was recognized in South Africa (Swart, 1997). The Transvaal and Natal Education Department employed special instructors or visiting teachers in 1948 to address some of the school population's social welfare requirements (Rocher, 1977 & Western Cape SSW Forum, 1995). Rocher (1977) further highlighted that there is a need for school social work in South Africa's social welfare system. Rocher (1977) went on to say that the lack of school social work in South Africa's social welfare system was a major source of worry in the late 1970s. Thus, the value of school social work towards providing support was recognized in the development of education in the 1970s in South Africa (Rocher, 1977). Since then, various South
African researchers have increasingly underscored the need for school social work within the South African education system (Le Roux, 1987; Kasiram, 1988, 1993; Kemp, 2017; Swart, 1997). During the 1970s, social service regulatory bodies (e.g., National Council for Child and Family Welfare, 1974; National Welfare Council, 1973/4; National Council for Mental Health, 1977); professional bodies (e.g., Social Workers' Association of South Africa, 1967; Commission for Social Work, 1973/6) and social advocacy agencies (e.g., NICRO, 1970s; Oranje Vroue Vereniging, 1971) all emphasised the importance of social work services in various types of schools.

School social work was recently recognized as a specialty area within the social work profession in South Africa by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), the governing authority for social workers (2010). The South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), as the regulatory body for Social Workers, acknowledged school social work to be a specialisation area within the social work profession in South Africa (WCED, 2010).

Political leaders, such as the Premier of the Western Cape, Helen Zille, expressed the need for SSW and referred to the important role school social workers could play especially about the prevention of substance abuse in the schools (Argus, et al. 2010). According to Rocher (1977), 13.5 per cent of the white school population required social work assistance. He went on to say that there was adequate data to back up the assertion that other populations had equivalent or greater requirements than the White population at the time. The need for school social work intervention has been acknowledged in all school populations, and it has been expanded to treat a wide range of social pathologies such as para-suicide, behavioural difficulties, substance misuse, juvenile delinquency, truancy, learning problems, and family collapse (WCED, 2001).

In 1987, the first school social worker was hired (Kemp, 2017). Since 1983, school social workers have been employed in several regions as part of the educational support services (Swart, 1997). The service was usually housed under the Department of Education, and it offered support to students, parents, and educators. From four school social workers working in ordinary schools in 1995 to 46 school social workers at the district level in 2010, the WCED has grown its workforce of school social workers (Argus, et al. 2010). In addition, the number of school social workers employed in schools increased from 4 to 166 in 2017. Even though school social work is based on basic social work concepts and practices, school social work varies in its application and institutional arrangements from nation to country (Rocher, 1977 in Welfare Focus, 1985). This variation is especially evident in the South African context, where school social work is practised in diverse ways in different provinces.

According to Collins (1982), during the 1980s, the Department of Education saw socio-pedagogues or visiting teachers as focusing on cognitive-affective development, whereas school social workers focused on the social functioning and interaction of the child in the school, home, and community, with an emphasis on cognitive-affective development in this broader context. However, the Interdepartmental Committee on Rehabilitation Matters believed that socio-pedagogics and social workers overlapped in 1976, and the Social Workers Association of South Africa had already warned in 1968 that this overlap resulted in late referrals to welfare authorities for specialised intervention. More recently, the Western Cape SSW conference (1995) agreed that the Committee of Education Heads had endorsed the notion. In both cases, implementation was delayed due to a) financial considerations; b) the impending passage of social worker legislation, such as the Social and Associated Workers Act; and c) the need for these education authorities to establish staffing structures, salary scales, and promotion opportunities.

In 1979, the Western Cape and the Natal Education Departments recognized the socio-pedagogues' preventive function concerning the learner and his or her family. The Committee of Education Heads stipulated in 1980 that dual registration, i.e., bachelor's level degrees in both education and social work, was a necessity. Furthermore, the De Lange Commission (1981) fuelled the growth of school social work, with a focus on "special needs children," guidance, and parental participation. The Commission identified issues with a) the demand for special education for children with special needs; b) the lack of adequate facilities for child identification, education, diagnosis/classification; and c) the provision of assistance and specialised services both inside and outside the school setting, as well as the volume of demand. Several other issues were discovered, including a) scarcity of educated, specialised staff; b) issues of specialised schools in connection to mainstream education and flexibility in mobility between the two; c) responsibility for mental-health provisions; and d) achieving parental involvement (Rocher, 1977; Swart, 1997).

Geldenhuys (1982, in Swart, 1997) emphasised the importance of multi-professional collaboration and teamwork, as well as the need for social work to have its own professional identity while contributing to the teaching process. The survey stated that school social work remained essentially theoretical, owing to educational authorities' firm belief that socio-pedagogic and school counselling services adequately satisfied the needs of students. In 1982, SSW and socio-pedagogic coexisted. The realisation that "parasocial work" specialists are unable to provide a holistic social work service with proper integration into the social welfare infrastructure led to the substitution of school social work for socio-pedagogues. The Western Cape Education Department transferred all sociologist and truant officers' roles to the Welfare Department in 1984 to create a School Social Work service (WCED, 2012). This signalled SSW's inclusion in the Department of Education, with the primary goal of correcting the issues raised in the De Lange and Geldenhuys study. There are differences in how School Social Work is operationalized across provinces.

**Theoretical Framework**

The researchers adopted the Ecological theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory is based on the premise that each system contains roles, norms, and guiding principles that may shape the growth of its members, and determine the way an individual behaves.
Ecological theory is explained by the following five environmental systems, which an individual interacts with: Microsystem: This system comprises institutions such as the family, school, religion, neighbourhood, and peers, and they closely and directly impact the child's development.

Mesosystem: This system comprises interconnections between the microsystems, family-teacher interactions, and relationships between peers of the child and the family. The relationship between school and home is an example of a mesosystem. These two settings are often connected because they both help the child and collaborate to ensure that he or she has safe and stable growth. In this proposed study, the rapport between teachers and school social workers may not go unnoticed since the two play a major role in learners' development, particularly in helping the learner.

Exosystem: It is composed of the relationships between a social environment in which one has no active role and the immediate context. There are places where children have indirect interaction, such as their parents’ workplace. This can also have an impact on them. For example, a parent who is mistreated at work may vent out their frustrations at home, which may result in the child bullying or being aggressive towards other learners at school, which creates a problem for them and requires the intervention of social workers.

Macrosystem: Describes the society in which people live and communicate with each other. The Macrosystem includes socioeconomic status, poverty, the Child's parents’ workplace, and the school setting.

Chronosystem: This system is made up of environmental events and the transitions that occur during a Child's life. The chronosystem adds to the influence of both the change and constancy of a child’s environment.

Ecological theory indicates that human development depends on various types of environmental systems. This theory helps us understand what causes children to behave differently by looking for patterns that contrast behaviour at home with behaviour at school and work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research and Methodology

The researcher selected the qualitative approach to guide the study. According to De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, and Delport (2011), a qualitative approach involves understanding human behaviour from the perspective of the people involved. McRoy (1995), adds that the qualitative approach stems from an antipositivistic, interpretive approach, is idiographic and thus holistic in nature and is directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their societal and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories. This type of research typically takes place in the natural world, drawing on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The qualitative approach is therefore regarded as unstructured because it allows flexibility in all research aspects (Denzin& Lincon, 2008). This approach was selected and deemed fit because it helped the researcher understand the perceptions of principals and circuit managers on the need for school social workers in Mankweng.

Research Design

A descriptive research design was chosen for the study. According to McCombes (2019), a descriptive research design aims to accurately and systematically describing a population, situation, or phenomenon. Moreover, it can use a wide variety of research methods to investigate one or more variables. Descriptive research was found fit for the study because it helped and allowed the researcher to answer what, where, when, and how questions. According to Hancock, Algozzine, and Lim (2021), a descriptive design...
assisted and allowed the researcher to describe, analyse and interpret a phenomenon, which in these cases was the perceptions of principals and circuit managers on the need for school social workers.

**Population and Sampling**

A study population is a complete set of individuals or other entities to which study outcomes are to be generalised (Engel & Schutt, 2016). The population of the study was in the Capricorn district. Capricorn District is divided into two (2) regions, namely, the Capricorn South and North regions. However, the focus was placed on schools that are in the South region. The South region is made up of four (4) clusters, from which Dimamo, Lebopo, Mamabolo, and Kgakotlou emerged. A purposive sample of ten (10) participants was selected for this study which consisted of six (6) principals and four (4) circuit managers from four (4) clusters in the Capricorn South. The participants were selected using a non-probability sampling method, namely, the purposive sampling method. According to Barratt, Ferris, and Lenton (2015), purposive sampling relies on the researchers’ knowledge of the field and rapport with members of targeted networks.

The foregoing is based on the researcher’s judgement and was motivated by the purpose of the study (De Vos et al., 2011). The participants were selected using a criterion based on certain characteristics they shared. These common characteristics included participants coming from the same circuit (Mankweng) which was suitable for the selection criteria and ensured that the data collected was relevant and accurate. Participants were not forced to participate in the study.

**Exploratory multiple case study design**

Considering that the authors adopted a qualitative approach to the study, an exploratory multiple-case study design was selected. Yin (2014) explains exploratory case study design as a design that attempts to answer the question of ‘what’ in research.

According to De Massis and Kotlar (2014, p.16), an exploratory case study design should be used when the aim is to understand how a phenomenon takes place. In the context of the study, the researchers were interested in unpacking the need for social workers in South African schools.

**Data collection methods**

Data collection refers to a process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest in an established systematic approach that enables one to answer stated research questions, and hypotheses and evaluate outcomes (Kabir, 2016; Bhandari, 2021).

Firstly, the researchers scheduled appointments with participants, and interviews were conducted in private spaces to ensure participants felt comfortable and free. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used for data collection. These types of interviews were ideal because they allowed the researchers to make follow-ups on certain avenues of the interview as well as participants. This gave the researchers a comprehensive picture of the participant’s daily life experiences. Semi-structured interviews are mainly appropriate when the researcher is mostly fascinated by complications or when an issue is datable or intimate (De Vos et al., 2011).

The interviews used in this study allowed participants to be free to respond to open-ended questions as they wished, and the researchers were able to probe the responses (Mcintosh & Morse, 2015). Before the commencement of data collection, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Turffloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC). The researchers also obtained permission from gatekeepers at the Department of Education, which covers Mankweng Circuit. Thereafter, ten (10) participants were interviewed by the researcher from Mankweng Circuit using a list of questions carefully constructed. A total response rate of hundred per cent (100%) was successfully achieved. An audio recording device was used with the permission of the participants to record their responses. The researchers also used field notes to back up the interview process.

**Data collection and analysis procedures**

The researchers conducted individual interviews with school principals and circuit managers over two weeks. In this research, they employed inductive Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) for data analysis, enabling them to derive themes from the evolving research findings. Qualitative data analysis involves seeking overarching patterns and connections among data categories, drawing from the principles of grounded theory (Marshall & Rossman, as referenced in De Vos et al., 2011).

The study specifically utilised thematic content analysis (TCA) as the analytical approach. As per O'Leary (2014), TCA is a technique for identifying, analysing, and presenting patterns or themes within the data, providing a detailed and minimally structured account of the dataset. The researchers selected TCA due to its capacity to interpret and emphasis emerging themes and insights related to the necessity of school social workers. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that when employing thematic analysis, the researcher must also specify whether they are using deductive or inductive thematic analysis.

**Findings and Discussions**

**Learners encounter hurdles at school**

The study revealed a prominent theme related to the difficulties encountered by students and educators. This section's objective was to identify and elucidate the obstacles experienced by teachers and learners within educational institutions. Participants conveyed a sense that children are increasingly confronting various social issues and external influences that hinder their effectiveness as
students. Existing literature underscores that schools serve as spaces where children gain knowledge, engage with peers, and develop self-awareness and interpersonal skills. Consequently, the educational environment must be supportive (Constable, 2008; Bezuidenhout, 2013; and Boakye, Ampiah, 2017).

The finding was expressed as follows:

**Participant 1:** In response to your query about the difficulties learners encounter, well, there are numerous challenges that our students confront. These challenges encompass a wide spectrum, including social issues, financial constraints, and variations in family backgrounds. However, in my role as a principal, it is my responsibility to acknowledge that our students come from diverse backgrounds and require support from both their parents and our educators. Once they are part of our school community, we assume a caregiving role, addressing all aspects of their well-being. When children do not receive proper upbringing and care, these challenges can hinder their academic performance, preventing them from reaching their full potential in school.

**Participant 7:** Some of our learners are stressed out because of the challenges they experience at home, and we have to deal with their anxiety and their breaking points. This is sometimes also affects educators because they deal with different issues from different learners.

A research investigation carried out by Shepard et al, (2012) revealed that the definition of a favourable and conducive learning environment depends on the specific socialisation and cultural context in which a child is raised. An analogous study by Edelson et al. (2013) corroborated this, suggesting that learners readily acquire and adapt to both positive and negative behaviours. Hence, ensuring a healthy and social school environment is of utmost importance for the growth and well-being of children. By the theoretical framework underlying this study, the ecological theory posits that individuals are profoundly influenced by the environmental systems in which they are nurtured. Consequently, exposure to either favourable or unfavourable environments significantly shapes how a person interacts with others.

**Poverty**

The findings of this study found that poverty is the main threat to children’s growth and development in their education as well as their mental health. The findings of the study are supported by Moloi (2019) and Mathebula et al, (2022) who state that children living under emotional stress adversely affect their learning and development. Moreover, malnutrition can affect a child’s cognitive abilities as well as their level of concentration. This finding is also consistent with the Ecological Theory (1979), which states that even though the child may seem far removed from government policies and other economic systems, they often have an impact on the child’s life. An example would be poverty in this case because children who come from a poor family or community setup and experience little to no support struggle with confidence, which reduces their desire to learn (Moloi, 2019).

The findings were expressed as follows:

**Participant 6:** We teach learners who come to school with an empty stomach. I mean, you will find learners who run to be the first on the Q for food because that would be their first meal and probably their last meal.

**Participant 8:** The majority of these children from poverty-stricken families hardly ever perform well in their academics, they have no interest in their school work or are even well taken care of at home; they are without proper school shoes and jerseys in winter, when asked why are they not wearing a jersey they will tell you that they do not have one.

**Participant 3:** Hunger, starvation, and lack of resources like gadgets have since gotten worse since COVID-19 because these learners do not come to school every day, so this would mean that they only eat once or twice a week at school, and the rest of the days we do not know what they eat. Moreover, these learners do not even have access to phones or data and are unable to complete schoolwork sent using WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms.

While the study indicates that poverty deprives families of the power to insist on an education system that answers their needs, COVID-19 has also exposed and declared the inequalities in the country’s childhood education. This is substantiated by a study conducted by Ayanda in Khayelitsha that states that e-learning has always been for the middle class and upper classes, leaving behind the working class to fend for themselves. As a result, even though parents across the country may be deeply concerned about their children’s education, many do not have access to devices, data, electricity, or stationery to make remote learning a possibility (Anciano, Cooper-Knock.Dube, Papane & Majola, 2020). A study conducted by the International Centre Investigative Report (ICIR) found that Nine-year-old Ibrahim Useni, who attends Local Education Authority (LEA) primary school in Nigeria-Kubwa, was spotted on a Monday morning in March 2023 hawking sachet water under a pedestrian bridge in the area where he told the ICIR that he was sent out of school due to his parents’ inability to pay the Parents Teachers Association (PTA) levy demanded by his school. Moreover, he is also unable to afford textbooks and other writing materials. This is an indication that while education is compulsory but it is not afforded to everyone (ICIR, 2023).

The findings of this study show us that children are raised in catastrophic environments. Their lack of love, food security and other basic needs like proper clothing at home results in children not wanting to go to school or only going to school so that they can be fed. Consequently, learners end up missing the whole point of education or school, which complicates their learning process.
Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even worse; learners have lost interest in school because they only attend once or twice a week (Hogan et al., 2020).

Substance Abuse

The participants are of the view that substance abuse is one of the most drastic challenges faced in schools, particularly in high school. Research worldwide shows that drug and alcohol abuse are some of the major burdens of societies in the 21st century. Globally, learners in schools are abusing drugs and alcohol (UNICEF, 2008; WHO, 2014; USAID, 2017). In addition, according to the United Nations, globally, Cannabis (Dagga) is a widely consumed illicit drug. Although it is not the primary drug of abuse in most nations, such as Europe, Asia, and America, it is the primary drug of abuse in Africa, especially among young people. The participants disputed that learners abuse drugs because of peer pressure. This is supported by Seggie (2012) and Strauss (2019), who assert that these consequences of drug use are an escape from the overwhelming pressures the youth of today face daily and the significant impact of peer pressure, which is the desire by adolescents to fit in and be socially accepted by their peers because they place a high value on the opinion of their peers.

Participants echoed the following responses:

Participant 4: I have lost count of the number of times where the issue of substance abuse is addressed among our schools in Mankweng. I do not understand the world we are living in; our learners are comfortable using substances to an extent that even when you find them smoking, they are not even ashamed.

Participant 5: Drugs are a serious case in this school. I remember there was a time when there was a case of a class who decided to contribute money and bought dagga and easy-mix muffins. They asked one of their classmates to mix the two and bake them; they referred to these as “Space cookies” which the entire class did not learn that day. They were very disruptive, some kept on laughing the entire time during school lessons, whilst some were sleeping. To add on, this class is the worst when it comes to their school performance, they never take anything seriously.

Participant 8: Our learners are burdened by issues from home and sometimes I believe smoking and school is the only place where they get to offload their issues. You will find these learners smoking during break time and in between class.

It can be noted that substance abuse is regarded as a life-threatening social issue that is used to relieve stress, derive pleasure, and gain social status among peers. The findings of the study reveal that the use of substances among learners is a result of peer pressure for most learners, whereas for others it’s a coping mechanism for their personal problems. It is the researcher’s opinion that once the learner has conformed to peer pressure and feels the urge to fit in a group, then the chances of the learner performing well at school are slim. This view is supported by Mabote and Diraditsile (2017), who found that one of the observed consequences involving school problems associated with substance abuse among young people includes lowered commitment to education, declining grades, absenteeism from school, increased potential for dropping out of school, and higher truancy. Moreover, a study conducted in India found that more than 220 million children in 2.6 million secondary schools were experiencing poor mental health, sexual abuse and peer violence (Huxtable, 2021).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings of this study divulge that poverty is the main threat to children’s growth and development in their education as well as their mental health. Moreover, this study demonstrates how children are raised in devastating environments which also exposes them to various stressors, including financial instability, housing insecurity and family conflicts. These psychosocial stressors can have a significant impact on mental health, potentially leading to anxiety, depression and behavioural issues. Substance abuse is one of the most drastic challenges faced in schools, particularly in high school. The findings of the study further reveal peer influence is a significant factor among learners using substances, whereas for others it’s a coping mechanism for their personal problems. By addressing issues such as bullying, discrimination, and child negligence, social workers contribute to creating a positive school environment which enhances the effectiveness of the educational system by providing a safe and inclusive environment for learning. The practical implications of involving school social workers encompass a wide range of activities varying from advocating for learners’ well-being to family and community engagement collaboration and prevention programs. This involvement strengthens the support network around children, ensuring that they receive consistent care and assistance both at home and in the school environment.

In conclusion, the pivotal role of school social workers in addressing and ameliorating various societal issues within the educational landscape cannot be overstated. Their dynamic responsibilities extend to the identification, prevention, and intervention in an array of challenges that students encounter, ranging from mental health concerns to family crises and substance abuse problems. By cultivating a supportive and compassionate presence within the school community, these professionals establish a haven where students can openly express their concerns and access the help they need, ultimately contributing to their academic success and overall well-being. The investment in school social workers is an investment in creating a more nurturing and inclusive educational environment, where positive social development thrives and paves the way for a brighter future for our students.

Therefore, this study puts forth the subsequent recommendations:
i. School Social work should be introduced as a specialised field.

ii. The Department of Social Development and the SACSISP should collaborate and employ school social workers.

iii. The Department of Higher Education and Training and SACSISP should collaborate to introduce school social work as an advanced field from a master's level.

iv. The SACSISP should promote policies that encourage the integration of mental health services through collaborating with mental health agencies such as the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) and South African Federation for Mental Health (SAFMH) to establish on-site counselling services making mental health support more accessible to learners.

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References


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