Bridging the Gap: The Impact of the Shortage of Social Workers on Psychosocial Support in South African Schools

Medwin Dikwanyane Sepadi [1]

Moshohli Kenneth Malatji [2]

Nthabanele Enoch Rabotata [3]

Sethuthuthu Lucky Vuma [4]

[1] Senior Lecturer, Department of Education Studies, University of Limpopo
ORCID 0000-0002-7537-5566
[2] Senior Lecturer, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of South Africa
ORCID 0000-0002-2596-6448,
[3] Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of South Africa
ORCID 0000-0003-4840-5755
[4] Senior Lecturer, Department of Cultural and Political Studies, University of Limpopo
ORCID 0000-0001-5284-297X

Abstract

Providing school psychosocial support is essential for promoting learner well-being and academic success. However, South African schools continue to face a critical shortage of social workers, limiting access to necessary interventions for learners experiencing socio-emotional, behavioural, and mental health challenges. This literature-based study explores the role of social workers in school-based psychosocial support, the impact of their absence on learners and educators, and the broader implications for the education system. Drawing on national and international literature, the paper examines existing policies, including the Department of Basic Education Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework, and highlights the gaps in implementation. The study also discusses alternative psychosocial support mechanisms currently in place and evaluates their effectiveness without dedicated social workers. Finally, the paper provides recommendations for strengthening psychosocial support structures through policy reforms, capacity building, and multi-sectoral collaboration to address the growing mental health and social challenges learners face.

Keywords: psychosocial support, social workers, interventions, frameworks, policy, mental health

1. Introduction

Psychosocial support plays a crucial role in fostering learner well-being, emotional resilience, and academic success. Schools serve as primary environments where learners develop not only academically but also socially and emotionally. The presence of social workers in schools is essential in addressing various psychosocial challenges, including mental health concerns, behavioural issues, trauma, and socio-economic hardships that impact learning outcomes (Department of Education, 2021). However, South African schools face a critical shortage of social workers, leading to a significant gap in psychosocial service provision. This gap has placed additional pressure on teachers, learner support agents (LSAs), and school-based support teams (SBSTs), who

often lack the specialized training required to provide comprehensive psychosocial interventions (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2020).

The shortage of social workers in South African schools is exacerbated by systemic challenges such as inadequate funding, policy implementation gaps, and a high demand for social services across various sectors (Soudien, 2021). According to the DBE's Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework, social workers should be an integral part of school-based support teams to ensure early intervention and holistic learner development (DBE, 2021). However, a lack of dedicated funding and workforce constraints have led to an overreliance on alternative support structures such as LSAs and community-based organizations, which may not always have the necessary expertise or resources to address complex psychosocial issues (Monareng, 2023).

Internationally, countries with well-established school-based social work programs have demonstrated improved learner well-being, reduced dropout rates, and enhanced academic performance (UNESCO, 2019). In contrast, the South African education system continues to struggle with high rates of learner distress, absenteeism, and behavioural challenges, many of which could be mitigated through the presence of trained social workers in schools (Spaull, 2015). While policies such as the Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) (DBE, 2014) emphasize the need for psychosocial interventions, their implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in under-resourced schools in rural and township areas (Ndlovu & Mkhize, 2022).

This paper explores the role of social workers in school-based psychosocial support, examines the impact of their absence on learners and educators, and critically analyzes the policies that govern their integration into the South African education system. The study is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework underpinning the study, Section 3 examines the global and local roles of social workers in schools, and Section 4 discusses the current shortage of social workers in South African schools. Section 5 evaluates existing psychosocial support mechanisms, while Section 6 provides policy analysis and discusses government interventions. Section 7 offers recommendations for strengthening psychosocial support structures, followed by the conclusion in Section 8.

2. Theoretical Framework

The role of social workers in schools can be analyzed through various theoretical perspectives that highlight the interconnectedness between learners, their environments, and psychosocial support structures. This paper is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Social Support Theory, as these frameworks provide insights into the impact of psychosocial support on learner development, well-being, and academic performance.

2.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a holistic understanding of how different environmental factors influence a learner's development. The theory posits that individuals exist within multiple layers of influence, ranging from immediate relationships to broader societal structures. These layers, known as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, interact to shape an individual's experiences and development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

In the school context, social workers operate within the microsystem (direct interactions with learners, teachers, and families) and the mesosystem (connections between school, home, and external social services). Their absence disrupts critical support systems, leaving learners vulnerable to mental health challenges, behavioural issues, and social instability (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2014). Furthermore, at the exosystem level, policies governing the employment and deployment of social workers in schools determine the accessibility of psychosocial support. The microsystem, which includes national policies and cultural attitudes toward mental health and social work, also influences the prioritization of social work services in education (Soudien, 2021).

By applying Bronfenbrenner's theory, this paper underscores the interdependence of educational, social, and governmental systems in ensuring effective psychosocial support for learners. The shortage of social workers disrupts these systems, limiting schools' ability to address learners' psychosocial needs comprehensively.

2.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943, 1970) is instrumental in understanding the role of social workers in fulfilling learners' psychological and emotional well-being. The theory outlines five levels of human needs, which include:

Physiological Needs – Necessities such as food, water, and shelter.
Safety Needs – Protection from harm, stable environments, and emotional security.
Belongingness and Love Needs – Social connections, relationships, and a sense of community.

Esteem Needs – Self-worth, achievement, and recognition.

Self-Actualization – Personal growth and reaching one's full potential (Maslow, 1970).

In the absence of social workers, many learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, struggle to meet their safety, belongingness, and esteem needs due to exposure to poverty, abuse, neglect, and mental health challenges (DBE, 2020). Social workers play a critical role in helping learners navigate these challenges by providing counselling, referrals, and intervention services that support emotional resilience and academic performance (Spaull, 2015). Without this support, learners may become disengaged from school, leading to high absenteeism and dropout rates (Monareng, 2023).

2.3 Social Support Theory

The Social Support Theory emphasizes the importance of emotional, informational, and instrumental support in an individual's ability to cope with stress and adversity (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social workers serve as key providers of all three types of support in school settings:

Emotional Support – Providing counselling services, crisis intervention, and trauma-informed care to help learners manage stress, anxiety, and emotional distress.

Informational Support – Offering guidance to learners, educators, and parents regarding mental health, behavioural interventions, and available social services.

Instrumental Support – Facilitating access to essential resources such as food, shelter, and financial assistance through referrals and partnerships with external agencies (Gauteng Department of Education, 2021).

When schools lack social workers, learners may struggle to access critical support networks, exacerbating their vulnerabilities and reducing their ability to perform academically (Molepo, 2020). The absence of structured psychosocial services forces teachers and school support staff to fill this gap, often without adequate training or resources, further straining the education system (DBE, 2021).

2.4 Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives

Collectively, these theories highlight the urgent need for social workers in South African schools. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory illustrates how the shortage of social workers disrupts multiple layers of influence that shape learner development. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs emphasizes the necessity of meeting learners' psychological and emotional needs to ensure academic success. Social Support Theory underscores the critical role of social workers in providing emotional, informational, and instrumental support within the school environment.

By drawing on these theoretical perspectives, this paper demonstrates that the shortage of social workers in schools is not merely a staffing issue but a systemic challenge that affects learner well-being, school performance, and broader educational outcomes. Addressing this gap requires policy interventions, resource allocation, and multi-sectoral collaboration to ensure that learners receive the necessary psychosocial support

3. The Role of Social Workers in Schools

Social workers play a vital role in schools by providing psychosocial support, counselling, crisis intervention, and advocacy for learners facing socio-emotional challenges (Patel, Schmid & Turton, 2023). Their work extends beyond individual counselling to encompass family and community engagement, teacher support, and policy implementation to create an inclusive learning environment (DBE, 2020). Internationally, countries that have integrated social workers into their school systems have reported improved learner mental health, reduced absenteeism, and enhanced academic performance (UNESCO, 2019). In contrast, the shortage of social workers in South African schools has resulted in gaps in psychosocial service provision, placing an increased burden on educators and learner support agents (Monareng, 2023). This section explores the functions of school social workers, their impact on learner well-being and academic success, and global best practices in integrating social work into education

3.1 Functions of Social Workers in Schools

School social workers fulfil a multifaceted role that includes direct intervention, advocacy, and system-level support. Their key functions include:

3.1.1 Mental Health and Emotional Support

Social workers provide counselling and intervention services for learners experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, trauma, and other emotional challenges (Soudien, 2021). In schools, they offer individual and group therapy sessions, conflict resolution programs, and emotional regulation techniques that help learners develop resilience and coping skills (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2014). Without dedicated social workers, many learners

fail to receive early mental health intervention, which can lead to academic decline, behavioural issues, and an increased risk of dropping out (Patel, Schmid & Turton, 2023; Spaull, 2015).

3.1.2 Behavioral and Disciplinary Support

Learners with behavioural and conduct issues often require structured psychosocial interventions rather than punitive disciplinary measures. Social workers help in identifying underlying causes of disruptive behaviour, such as trauma, family problems, or social exclusion, and develop intervention strategies that foster positive behavioural change (Pillay, Patel & Setlhare-Kajee, 2023: DBE, 2021). Studies have shown that schools with active social work programs experience lower rates of bullying, violence, and substance abuse among learners (Ndlovu & Mkhize, 2022).

3.1.3 Family and Community Engagement

Social workers bridge the gap between schools, families, and communities by facilitating home visits, parental counselling, and community outreach programs (Gauteng Department of Education, 2021). Many learners face family instability, neglect, or socio-economic hardships that affect their school performance. By engaging with families, social workers provide referrals to welfare services, substance abuse programs, and financial support initiatives that ensure holistic learner support (Damons, 2015*)*.

3.1.4 Crisis Intervention and Child Protection

Schools often serve as the first point of contact for abused, neglected, or at-risk children. Social workers play a crucial role in identifying cases of child abuse, gender-based violence, and neglect and ensuring timely intervention through child protection services (DBE, 2020). The absence of social workers means that many cases go unreported or inadequately addressed, further endangering vulnerable learners (Pillay, Patel & Setlhare-Kajee, 2023).

3.1.5 Advocacy and Policy Implementation

Social workers advocate for inclusive education policies, learner support programs, and the implementation of child protection laws (Chereni, 2017; Donald et al., 2014). They assist in developing individualized support plans for learners with special needs and ensure that educational policies align with broader child welfare and mental health initiatives (DBE, 2021). Without social workers, the enforcement of policies such as the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework and the Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) remains inconsistent, particularly in under-resourced schools (Chereni, 2017).

3.2 The Impact of Social Workers on Learner Well-being and Academic Performance

The presence of social workers in schools is positively correlated with improved learner outcomes. Studies from various countries have demonstrated that schools with integrated social work programs report better learner attendance, higher academic achievement, and reduced dropout rates (UNESCO, 2019). Some key impacts include:

Increased Academic Performance – Learners who receive psychosocial support demonstrate better concentration, higher motivation, and improved classroom engagement (Soudien, 2021).

Reduced Absenteeism – Social workers help address home-related challenges such as poverty, transportation, and domestic violence, reducing school absenteeism (Ndlovu & Mkhize, 2022).

Improved Social Skills – Learners in schools with social workers exhibit higher emotional intelligence, conflict resolution skills, and peer relationships (DBE, 2020).

Lower Dropout Rates – Targeted psychosocial interventions help at-risk learners remain in school by providing academic, emotional, and social support (Spaull, 2015).

3.3 Global Best Practices in School Social Work

Many countries have successfully integrated social workers into their education systems as part of a holistic learner support strategy. Key global practices include:

United States – Schools employ licensed social workers who collaborate with teachers, parents, and external agencies to provide counselling, mental health services, and crisis intervention (National Association of Social Workers, 2020).

United Kingdom – The Early Help Framework integrates social work services into schools to support vulnerable children and prevent long-term educational disengagement (Department for Education, 2019).

Finland – School social work is embedded in multi-disciplinary teams that include psychologists, counsellors, and special educators, ensuring comprehensive learner support (OECD, 2021).

Australia – The Student Well-being and Engagement Strategy mandates that every school has access to a social worker, ensuring early identification and intervention for at-risk learners (Government of Australia, 2020).

3.4 The South African Context: Gaps and Challenges

Despite international evidence supporting the integration of social workers into schools, South Africa lags in policy implementation. Challenges include:

Insufficient Social Workers South Africa has a low ratio of social workers to learners, with many schools having no access to dedicated social work services (Abdullah, 2015).

Funding Constraints – Limited government funding for school-based social work programs leads to reliance on NGOs and temporary initiatives (Monareng, 2023).

Inconsistent Policy Implementation – While the CSTL and SIAS frameworks emphasize psychosocial support, their execution remains fragmented (Woolf, Bantjes, & Kagee, 2015).

Overburdened Educators – Teachers often assume the role of social workers, despite lacking the training and resources to provide professional psychosocial support (DBE, 2020).

Social workers are essential in promoting learner well-being, enhancing academic performance, and ensuring holistic support in schools. Their absence in South African schools has created a significant gap in psychosocial service delivery, leaving many learners without adequate support. While global best practices demonstrate the effectiveness of school-based social work, South Africa continues to struggle with policy implementation, funding constraints, and workforce shortages. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-sectoral approach, policy reforms, and increased investment in school-based social work programs to ensure that learners receive the support they need to thrive academically and emotionally(Woolf, Bantjes, & Kagee, 2015).

4. The Shortage of Social Workers in South African Schools

The shortage of social workers in South African schools presents a significant challenge to the provision of adequate psychosocial support for learners. Despite the increasing recognition of the role of social workers in fostering learner well-being, academic success, and behavioural management, most schools lack dedicated social work professionals, leaving educators, learner support agents (LSAs), and school-based support teams (SBSTs) to fill the gap (DBE, 2021). This shortage is particularly concerning given the high levels of poverty, trauma, mental health issues, and social instability faced by many learners, particularly in rural and township schools (Khumalo, Ngcobo & Sithole, 2024). This section examines the extent of the shortage, the reasons behind it, and the implications for learners, educators, and the education system.

4.1 The Extent of the Shortage

South Africa has a severe shortage of social workers in schools, with a vast number of learners unable to access essential psychosocial services. According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE), there are currently 3,886 learner support agents (LSAs) in schools, yet only a fraction of these individuals are trained social workers (DBE, 2021). Additionally, only 1,175 schools receive rotating social worker services, leaving the majority of schools without any access to professional psychosocial intervention (DBE, 2020).

Compared to international standards, South Africa's school-to-social worker ratio is alarmingly high. In developed countries like the United States and Australia, policies mandate that every school have at least one social worker for every 250–500 learners (National Association of Social Workers, 2020; Government of Australia, 2020). In contrast, South African schools often share one social worker across multiple schools or districts, making it impossible to provide consistent, proactive support for vulnerable learners (Monareng, 2023).

4.2 Causes of the Shortage

Several factors contribute to the critical shortage of social workers in South African schools, including funding constraints, policy gaps, workforce shortages, and administrative challenges.

4.2.1 Limited Funding for School-Based Social Work

One of the primary reasons for the shortage is insufficient government funding for the employment of social workers in schools. Social workers are employed either by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) or the Department of Social Development (DSD), but education budgets prioritize teaching staff over psychosocial support personnel (DBE, 2021). As a result, schools rely on external partners such as UNICEF, Global Fund, and the Vodacom Foundation to provide psychosocial support, which leads to unsustainable, short-term interventions (Gauteng Department of Education, 2021).

4.2.2 Policy Gaps and Lack of Implementation

Although South Africa has progressive education policies—such as the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework and the Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) (DBE, 2014)—these policies lack clear implementation strategies regarding the hiring and integration of social workers into schools (Abdullah, 2015). Unlike countries where school social work is legislated, South Africa does not have a dedicated national framework that mandates social workers in schools (DBE, 2021).

4.2.3 Workforce Shortages and High Demand

South Africa faces a broader shortage of social workers across various sectors, including child welfare, healthcare, and corrections. Out of the estimated 55,000 qualified social workers in the country, only a small percentage are employed within the education sector (Soudien, 2021). The limited number of professionals available makes it difficult for the DBE to recruit and retain social workers in schools, as many opt for better-paying opportunities in private practice or NGOs (Monareng, 2023).

4.2.4 High Workload and Burnout Among Existing Social Workers

Due to the limited number of school social workers, those who are employed face overwhelming caseloads, sometimes handling hundreds of learners across multiple schools (DBE, 2021). This workload leads to burnout, low retention rates, and high turnover, further exacerbating the crisis (Chereni, 2017).

4.3 Implications of the Shortage on Learners and Schools

The shortage of social workers in South African schools has far-reaching consequences for learner well-being, educator workload, and the overall effectiveness of psychosocial support services.

4.3.1 Increased Mental Health Challenges Among Learners

Without access to social workers, learners struggle with unmanaged mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, trauma, and suicidal ideation (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2014). Research shows that 65% of young people in South Africa report experiencing mental health challenges, but do not seek help due to the lack of available services (UNICEF South Africa, 2023).

4.3.2 Higher Rates of Dropouts and Academic Decline

Learners facing psychosocial difficulties without adequate support are at a greater risk of academic failure and dropping out of school (Damons, 2015). Studies indicate that mental health struggles, exposure to violence, and socio-economic hardships contribute to high dropout rates in low-income schools (DBE, 2021).

4.3.3 Increased Burden on Teachers and Learner Support Agents

With no social workers available, the responsibility of providing psychosocial support often falls on teachers, learner support agents (LSAs), and school-based support teams (SBSTs) many of whom lack the training and capacity to address complex mental health and social issues (Gauteng Department of Education, 2021). This additional burden contributes to teacher stress and burnout, affecting overall classroom management and instructional quality (Pillay, Patel, & Setlhare-Kajee, 2023).

4.3.4 Limited Intervention in Cases of Abuse and Neglect

Social workers play a critical role in identifying and intervening in cases of child abuse, neglect, and domestic violence (DBE, 2020). However, the shortage of social workers means that many cases go unnoticed or are not adequately addressed, putting vulnerable learners at even greater risk (Monareng, 2023).

The shortage of social workers in South African schools represents a major gap in the country's education and child welfare systems. While the importance of psychosocial support is well-documented, limited funding, policy implementation challenges, workforce shortages, and high caseloads have hindered efforts to integrate social workers into schools. The implications of this shortage are severe, affecting learners' mental health, academic performance, and the overall capacity of schools to provide holistic education. Addressing this issue requires a concerted effort from government, policymakers, and educational stakeholders to prioritize the hiring, training, and retention of social workers in schools. The next section explores alternative psychosocial support mechanisms currently in place to compensate for this shortage and evaluates their effectiveness(Pillay, Patel, & Setlhare-Kajee, 2023).

5. Existing Psychosocial Support Mechanisms in Schools

The absence of social workers in South African schools has necessitated the implementation of alternative psychosocial support mechanisms. These initiatives, driven by both government policies and external partnerships, aim to mitigate the impact of social and emotional challenges on learners. While these mechanisms provide some level of support, they are often limited in scope, effectiveness, and sustainability due to inadequate funding, training deficiencies, and lack of integration with professional mental health services. This section explores the key psychosocial support initiatives currently in place, including the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework, learner support agents (LSAs), school-based support teams (SBSTs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and emerging telehealth interventions.

5.1 The Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) Framework

The CSTL framework serves as the primary government initiative aimed at integrating psychosocial support into the school environment. Developed in collaboration with the Southern African Development Community

(SADC), the CSTL framework seeks to create a comprehensive support system that addresses social, emotional, and behavioural challenges affecting learners (DBE, 2020). This framework acknowledges that a child's ability to succeed academically is deeply intertwined with their psychological well-being and social environment.

One of the primary objectives of CSTL is to strengthen the capacity of schools to provide in-house psychosocial support. This includes initiatives such as teacher training in mental health awareness, the deployment of learner support agents (LSAs), and the establishment of school-based support teams (SBSTs). In theory, these interventions are designed to fill the gap left by the shortage of social workers. However, in practice, the implementation of CSTL has been uneven and inconsistent. Many schools, particularly those in rural and underprivileged areas, lack the necessary resources, personnel, and training to effectively operationalize the framework (Patel, Schmid, Sani & Turton, 2023).

A major limitation of CSTL is its reliance on educators and untrained personnel to fulfil the roles that should ideally be handled by professional social workers. Teachers, already burdened with heavy workloads, are often expected to identify and support learners dealing with complex social issues, despite having minimal training in counselling and psychological intervention (DBE, 2021). This over-reliance on underqualified personnel not only reduces the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions but also places additional stress on educators, leading to burnout and diminished teaching quality (Spaull, 2015).

5.2 Learner Support Agents (LSAs) as a Substitute for Social Workers

In response to the lack of social workers, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) introduced learner support agents (LSAs) to provide basic psychosocial assistance in schools. LSAs are typically young individuals from local communities who receive minimal training before being deployed to schools to assist with mentoring, peer counselling, and referral services (DBE, 2021). Their role is primarily to support learners at risk of dropping out, experiencing social challenges, or struggling with mental health issues.

While LSAs play an important role in bridging the support gap, their effectiveness is severely limited by their lack of professional qualifications. Unlike trained social workers, LSAs are not equipped to handle serious mental health conditions, cases of abuse, or complex behavioural issues (Monareng, 2023). Additionally, LSAs often work under temporary contracts funded through external grants, such as the HIV and AIDS Conditional Grant, making their positions financially unstable and subject to budget cuts (DBE, 2020).

Furthermore, the lack of supervision and support for LSAs has resulted in high turnover rates and inconsistent service delivery. Many LSAs leave their positions due to poor remuneration, limited career progression, and the emotional toll of handling sensitive learner issues with little formal guidance (Gauteng Department of Education, 2021). While LSAs provide a valuable first point of contact for struggling learners, they cannot replace the need for trained professionals capable of offering in-depth psychosocial support and intervention.

5.3 School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) and Their Role in Psychosocial Support

School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) are another critical component of the DBE's approach to psychosocial support. These teams are composed of teachers, school administrators, and learner support agents, and their primary function is to identify learners in need, develop intervention strategies, and refer complex cases to district-based support teams (DBSTs) (Pillay, Patel, & Setlhare-Kajee, 2023; DBE, 2021).

SBSTs aim to provide early identification and intervention for learners facing academic and emotional difficulties. In theory, these teams should work closely with social workers and psychologists from district offices, ensuring that learners receive professional support when needed. However, due to the shortage of social workers, many schools lack access to district-based professionals, leaving SBSTs with limited options for referring learners to appropriate services (Ndlovu & Mkhize, 2022).

Additionally, SBST members often lack specialized training in psychosocial support, making it difficult for them to develop effective intervention strategies. Many teachers serving on these teams do so in addition to their regular teaching responsibilities, leading to time constraints and ineffective case management (DBE, 2020). As a result, while SBSTs provide a formal structure for learner support, their impact is hindered by limited expertise, resource shortages, and weak links to external mental health services.

5.4 The Role of NGOs and External Partners in Psychosocial Support

Given the gaps in government-provided services, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private sector partners have stepped in to supplement psychosocial support in schools. Organizations such as the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), UNICEF, and Lifeline South Africa offer mental health counselling, suicide prevention programs, and trauma debriefing services in selected schools (SADAG, 2023).

While these initiatives provide valuable support, their reach is limited to specific schools and urban areas, leaving many rural learners without access to their services. Furthermore, NGO interventions often operate on a temporary, project-based model, meaning that services can be discontinued when funding cycles end (Khanyile, 2020). There is also limited coordination between NGOs and school-based support structures, leading to gaps in service continuity and follow-up care (DBE, 2021).

5.5 The Rise of Telehealth and Digital Mental Health Services

To address the shortage of in-person support, the DBE has begun exploring telehealth and digital mental health interventions. These include the DBE Telehealth Solution, a mental health counselling app launched in collaboration with UNICEF and the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) (DBE, 2023). Additionally, organizations like SADAG have developed online suicide prevention programs and self-help resources for learners in distress (SADAG, 2023).

While digital interventions offer a cost-effective and scalable solution, they are not without challenges. Many learners, especially in rural and low-income communities, lack access to smartphones and stable internet connections, making it difficult for them to engage with online mental health services Khanyile, 2020). Furthermore, while chatbots and digital platforms can provide general guidance, they lack the personalized, in-depth intervention that face-to-face counselling offers (Soudien, 2021).

While South Africa has implemented various alternative psychosocial support mechanisms, these efforts remain inadequate in addressing the full scope of learners' needs. CSTL, LSAs, SBSTs, NGO interventions, and telehealth solutions provide some level of support, but their effectiveness is compromised by resource limitations, lack of professional oversight, and inconsistent implementation. Ultimately, these mechanisms serve as temporary measures rather than long-term solutions to the shortage of school social workers. Addressing these shortcomings requires policy reforms, increased investment in social work personnel, and stronger coordination between government, schools, and external partners. The following section will explore policy analysis and government interventions aimed at addressing these challenges (Khanyile, 2020).

6. Policy Analysis and Government Interventions

The South African government has recognized the importance of psychosocial support in schools and has developed various policies and interventions aimed at addressing the emotional, behavioural, and social challenges that impact learning. However, while these policies provide a strong foundation for promoting learner well-being, their implementation has been inconsistent, particularly due to the lack of trained social workers, limited funding, and poor coordination between departments. This section critically examines key policies related to psychosocial support in schools, assesses their effectiveness, and explores the extent to which government interventions have succeeded or fallen short in addressing the shortage of social workers.

6.1 The Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) Framework: A Promising but Underfunded Initiative

The Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework, introduced by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in partnership with the Southern African Development Community (SADC), is one of the most comprehensive policies aimed at integrating psychosocial support into the education system (DBE, 2020). The framework acknowledges that learners' ability to succeed academically is directly linked to their emotional and social well-being, and it aims to ensure that schools become sites of comprehensive care, support, and early intervention for vulnerable learners(Molepo, 2020).

While CSTL represents a progressive approach to psychosocial support, its implementation has been uneven across schools, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas (Ndlovu & Mkhize, 2022). One of the major shortcomings of the framework is that it relies heavily on existing school personnel, such as teachers, learner support agents (LSAs), and school-based support teams (SBSTs), rather than investing in professional social workers (DBE, 2021). This over-reliance on non-specialist staff has weakened the effectiveness of the program, as many educators lack the necessary training to handle complex mental health and social issues (Molepo, 2020).

Moreover, the CSTL framework lacks a dedicated funding model for hiring social workers, instead depending on partnerships with NGOs, international donors, and external grants (Monareng, 2023). This reliance on external funding makes the sustainability of the program uncertain, particularly when funding cycles end or donor priorities shift. As a result, while CSTL has strong policy intentions, it has failed to fully address the shortage of social workers in schools, leaving significant gaps in service delivery (Molepo, 2020).

6.2 The Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS): A Policy with Implementation Gaps

Another key policy designed to address the psychosocial needs of learners is the Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS), introduced by the DBE in 2014. The SIAS policy aims to identify learners in need of psychosocial and educational support at an early stage and provide them with appropriate interventions (DBE, 2014). This includes referrals to social workers, psychologists, and other specialized professionals.

In theory, SIAS could be a powerful tool for ensuring that learners facing social and emotional challenges receive timely and targeted support. However, the shortage of social workers has rendered many of its provisions ineffective, as most schools do not have the personnel needed to carry out proper screening and intervention (Ndlovu & Mkhize, 2022). Instead, the responsibility often falls on teachers, who may lack the expertise and time to conduct thorough assessments. This has resulted in delays in identifying at-risk learners, leading to increased dropouts, absenteeism, and unmanaged mental health issues (DBE, 2021).

Additionally, SIAS relies on a referral system, where learners needing psychosocial support should be directed to district-based support teams (DBSTs) for further intervention. However, due to severe understaffing at the district level, many cases remain unresolved, leaving vulnerable learners without the necessary care (Monareng, 2023). Without significant investment in expanding the number of school-based social workers and strengthening district support services, SIAS will remain largely ineffective in addressing the psychosocial needs of learners.

6.3 The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030: Ambitious Goals, Limited Execution

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 outlines a long-term vision for improving South Africa's education system, including the integration of psychosocial support services in schools (National Planning Commission, 2012). The plan acknowledges that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds face significant social and emotional barriers to learning and emphasizes the need for comprehensive school-based support services.

However, more than a decade after the launch of the NDP, progress in integrating social work services into schools has been slow (Soudien, 2021). One of the main reasons for this is budgetary constraints and competing priorities within the education sector. While the NDP proposes the expansion of psychosocial services, the government has not allocated sufficient resources to recruit and retain social workers in schools (DBE, 2021). Instead, funding continues to prioritize teacher recruitment and infrastructure development, leaving psychosocial support as an underfunded priority.

Furthermore, the NDP calls for greater interdepartmental collaboration between the DBE, the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Department of Health, and civil society organizations to provide holistic learner support. However, in practice, these departments often operate in silos, with minimal coordination, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent service delivery (Patel, Schmid, Sani & Turton, 2023). Unless stronger multi-sectoral collaboration and funding commitments are made, the NDP's vision for integrated psychosocial support in schools is unlikely to be fully realized.

6.4 Government Efforts to Expand Psychosocial Support: Progress and Challenges

Despite the challenges in policy implementation, the South African government has introduced some interventions aimed at addressing the shortage of social workers and strengthening school-based psychosocial support. For instance, in 2023, the DBE partnered with UNICEF and the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) to launch a Telehealth Solution, which provides remote counselling services for educators and learners (DBE, 2023).

While this initiative represents a step forward in expanding access to mental health services, it is not a substitute for in-person psychosocial support. Many learners, particularly those in rural areas, lack access to digital devices and stable internet connections, making it difficult for them to benefit from telehealth services (Ndlovu & Mkhize, 2022). Additionally, online counselling lacks the depth of face-to-face interactions, particularly for learners facing severe trauma, abuse, or suicidal ideation (Soudien, 2021).

Another recent government initiative has been the deployment of additional learner support agents (LSAs) in schools, particularly in areas with high rates of poverty, violence, and substance abuse (DBE, 2021). However, as discussed earlier, LSAs lack the professional training necessary to handle complex psychosocial cases, reinforcing the need for a long-term strategy to recruit and integrate qualified social workers into schools.

While South Africa has strong policy frameworks aimed at integrating psychosocial support into schools, their effectiveness has been undermined by poor implementation, limited funding, and a lack of trained personnel. Policies such as CSTL, SIAS, and the NDP 2030 provide a solid foundation for addressing learners' social and

emotional challenges, but without significant investment in social worker recruitment and interdepartmental collaboration, these policies remain largely aspirational.

Government interventions such as telehealth solutions and the expansion of LSAs offer short-term relief, but they do not address the systemic issue of inadequate professional psychosocial support in schools. Moving forward, policy reforms must focus on increasing funding for school-based social workers, improving coordination between departments, and ensuring that policies are effectively implemented at the school level. Without these changes, the psychosocial needs of learners will continue to go unmet, hindering their academic progress and overall well-being (Woolf, Bantjes & Kagee ,2015).

7. Recommendations and Strategies for Strengthening Psychosocial Support

Addressing the shortage of social workers in South African schools requires a multi-pronged strategy that includes policy reforms, sustainable funding, improved training, and multi-sectoral collaboration. While existing interventions such as learner support agents (LSAs) and school-based support teams (SBSTs) provide some relief, they cannot replace trained professionals. The following recommendations outline key steps to enhance psychosocial support in schools.

7.1 Prioritizing the Recruitment of Social Workers

The government must allocate dedicated funding to recruit and place full-time social workers in schools, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas. This could be supported through bursary programs for social work students, similar to the Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme for teachers. Additionally, incentives such as rural placement allowances could attract professionals to underserved communities (Ndlovu & Mkhize, 2022).

7.2 Strengthening Multi-Sectoral Collaboration

Better coordination between the DBE, the Department of Social Development (DSD), and the Department of Health is essential for effective service delivery. Establishing Provincial and District Psychosocial Support Committees can improve case tracking, intervention planning, and resource allocation. A centralized database should also be developed to monitor psychosocial interventions and ensure accountability (Monareng, 2023).

7.3 Expanding Training for Educators and Support Staff

Teachers, LSAs, and SBST members need specialized training in trauma-informed approaches, crisis intervention, and mental health first aid. Universities and social work organizations should offer short courses to equip school staff with essential psychosocial skills. Strengthening the SBST structure by including at least one trained counsellor per school would also improve learner support (DBE, 2021).

7.4 Leveraging Digital Mental Health Solutions

Telehealth and digital counselling services can help bridge the gap in psychosocial support. Expanding access to free Wi-Fi, mobile-based counselling apps, and online mental health resources could improve accessibility, particularly in remote areas. However, these services must complement, not replace, in-person interventions, especially for learners facing severe trauma and abuse (Soudien, 2021).

7.5 Securing Sustainable Funding

Psychosocial services must be prioritized in the education budget to ensure consistent funding for social worker salaries, training, and mental health programs. Partnerships with corporate sponsors, NGOs, and international donors could provide additional financial support. A ring-fenced budget for psychosocial services would ensure long-term sustainability (DBE, 2021).

Enhancing psychosocial support in schools requires urgent investment in social worker recruitment, better policy coordination, expanded training for school staff, and innovative digital solutions. Without these measures, learners' emotional and psychological needs will continue to go unmet, affecting their academic success and overall well-being. Addressing these gaps is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive education system

8. Study Limitations

This study is limited by its literature-based approach, relying on existing research and policy documents rather than primary data collection. As a result, it does not capture first-hand experiences of learners, educators, or social workers. Additionally, the study focuses specifically on South Africa, limiting broader comparisons with other education systems. Variations in provincial resource allocation and policy implementation are also not fully explored.

Furthermore, data availability on the exact number and impact of social workers in schools remains a challenge, as government reports are not always updated or publicly accessible. The study also does not assess the financial feasibility of expanding social work services in schools, which is a crucial factor for policy implementation. Despite these limitations, the findings highlight critical gaps in psychosocial support and emphasize the need for urgent policy interventions

9. Conclusions

The shortage of social workers in South African schools remains a critical barrier to effective psychosocial support, leaving many learners without the emotional and social assistance needed to thrive academically and personally. While policies such as the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework and the Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) acknowledge the need for comprehensive learner support, their implementation has been hindered by funding constraints, workforce shortages, and weak interdepartmental coordination. As a result, schools have relied on alternative support mechanisms, such as learner support agents (LSAs), school-based support teams (SBSTs), and telehealth initiatives, which, despite their benefits, lack the expertise and sustainability required for long-term impact.

To address these challenges, there is an urgent need for policy reforms, sustainable funding, and strategic recruitment of social workers in schools. Strengthening multi-sectoral collaboration between the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the Department of Social Development (DSD), and other stakeholders is crucial to ensuring effective service delivery. Additionally, investing in training programs for educators and school staff will enhance their capacity to identify and support learners in distress. Digital mental health solutions can complement but not replace in-person psychosocial services, particularly for learners facing severe trauma and socio-emotional difficulties.

Ultimately, ensuring accessible and professional psychosocial support in schools is not just a policy objective but a moral and social imperative. Without these interventions, vulnerable learners will continue to struggle with mental health issues, absenteeism, and academic underperformance, limiting their potential for future success. A coordinated, well-funded, and professionally driven approach to school-based psychosocial support is essential to creating an inclusive and supportive education system that prioritizes the well-being of all learners.

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