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Original Research

Teachers and School Social Workers Collaborating to Support South African Adolescents with Psychosocial Challenges

Gift Khumalo, Durban University of Technology, South Africa
Edmarie Pretorius, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

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Abstract: The strategies employed by teachers and school social workers are deemed pivotal in aiding adolescents grappling with psychosocial challenges. Despite the worldwide acknowledgment of the importance of comprehensive support for adolescent development, there exists an evident lack of inquiry into the approaches employed by these professionals in the context of South African public schools. This qualitative exploratory pilot study, conducted with teachers and school social workers (n = 6) from a bigger research project in two Gauteng District eleven schools, explores the perspectives of teachers and school social workers on supporting adolescents with psychosocial challenges. The thematic analysis confirmed that diverse approaches were used to support adolescents, the challenges faced by these professionals in their efforts to provide support, and existing and needed multidisciplinary collaborations in the school. The study recommends that a bigger research study be undertaken focusing on this current aim and multidisciplinary collaboration efforts in schools. It also argues that teachers need to be trained to identify adolescents with psychosocial challenges and school social workers need to be deployed in school settings.

Keywords: *Teachers, School Social Workers, Adolescents, Psychosocial Well-Being, Collaborative Practices*

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical phase of human development and is characterized by profound physical psychological and social transformations, typically spanning the years from puberty to adulthood. Adolescents, also referred to as teenagers or teens, are individuals aged 10 to 19, who are perceived as a relatively robust demographic group (World Health Organization 2021). Throughout this transformation, adolescents traverse numerous developmental milestones and grapple with an array of psychosocial challenges. These challenges include but are not limited to anxiety, sadness, diminished self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, behavioral issues, bullying, and substance use, which operate on various levels of their being (Nandhini and Karibeeran 2016). Adolescents also grapple with intricate identity formation and the cultivation of relationships, often contending with personal, social, and structural complexities (Sznitman, Zimmermann, and Van Petegem 2019). The intricate interplay of the challenges they face takes a toll on their academic performance and overall well-being (Khumalo 2024). Specifically, these

challenges frequently result in disengagement, behavioral disruptions, feelings of alienation, diminished motivation, and declines in academic performance (Finn and Zimmer 2012; Klem and Connell 2004; Khumalo 2024).

In low-middle-income countries (LMICs), like South Africa, adolescents encounter a constellation of socioeconomic struggles and structural disparities, including poverty, racial discrimination, and health disparities, which profoundly impact both adolescents and their families (Frederico and Whiteside 2015; Heard-Garris et al. 2021). Consequently, most adolescents often commence their educational journeys from positions of relative disadvantage, with the potential of falling further behind while they progress through the educational system, as compared to children in high-income countries (HICs) or privileged social groups (Guetto and Vergolini 2017). Additionally, given their experiences of psychosocial challenges and the influence of socioeconomic factors, adolescents are susceptible to academic difficulties and mental health disorders (Khumalo 2024; Ajaero, Nzeadibe, and Igboeli 2018). A comprehensive meta-analysis conducted by Polanczyk et al. (2015), drawing from studies across twenty-seven countries worldwide, underscores the global prevalence of mental disorders among children and adolescents. Findings reveal a prevalence rate of 13.4 percent for mental disorders, 6.5 percent for anxiety disorders, 2.6 percent for any depressive disorder, 3.4 percent for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and 5.7 percent for any disruptive disorder. In the South African context, the South African Stress and Health study disclosed that approximately 20 percent of youth grapple with depression and stress-related conditions annually (Ajaero, Nzeadibe, and Igboeli 2018). A U-Report South Africa poll conducted in 2023 further indicated that a staggering 60 percent of children and young individuals expressed a need for mental health support (UNICEF South Africa 2023). Moreover, the advent of the recent COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the adolescents' psychosocial challenges, fostering fear, anger, depression, and anxiety regarding their prospects (Imran, Zeshan, and Pervaiz 2020; Phelps and Sperry 2020). Academically, Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) explain that the consequences of these challenges manifest in reduced school attendance, elevated dropout rates, diminished academic performance, impaired concentration among learners, a deleterious classroom atmosphere, and suboptimal educational outcomes.

Teachers and school social workers (SSWers) play important roles in addressing the psychosocial challenges encountered by learners (Pretorius 2020). Traditionally, teachers are primarily responsible for imparting academic knowledge and focusing on achieving the prescribed curriculum. However, research underscores the significance of the non-academic support teachers offer, which yields positive outcomes in the development of adolescents (Murray and Greenberg 2000; Uslu and Gizir 2017). Allen et al. (2013) assert that teachers' roles encompass the creation of classroom environments characterized by a positive emotional climate, one that exhibits sensitivity to the needs and perspectives of adolescents. This emotionally nurturing classroom environment can be fostered through teachers'

cultivation of positive relationships with their learners, as academic engagement is often improved when such connections are established (Murray and Greenberg 2000). During adolescence, support within the teacher–student relationship, which assumes paramount importance, encompasses elements such as bonding (i.e., learners feeling cared for by their teachers), a sense of belonging (i.e., learners feeling a close affinity with their teachers), as well as trust and respect (Charteris and Page 2021; Longaretti 2020). Guo et al.'s (2020) research highlights the support provided by teachers as a significant predictor of adolescent mental well-being, suggesting that adolescents who receive greater care and assistance from their teachers tend to exhibit higher levels of mental well-being. Additionally, the relationships formed between teachers and adolescents serve as a critical determinant in fostering a sense of belonging among the latter within the school community (Longaretti 2020; Uslu and Gizir 2017). As articulated by Wentzel (1999), adolescents need to develop an attachment with their teachers before they can be expected to feel a sense of belonging to the broader school community. Moreover, the influence of teacher support extends to various aspects of adolescent development. These include their ability to adapt to their age, effectively manage their emotions, develop positive peer relationships, and experience a heightened sense of acceptance/comfort, safety, and competence within the school environment. The support provided by teachers serves as a safeguard against school dropout, exerting a lasting impact on the academic trajectories of adolescents (Lessard, Poirier, and Fortin 2010).

SSWers constitute a cadre of trained professionals bringing unique knowledge and skills to the school system and the multidisciplinary team rendering services in schools to enhance the psychosocial well-being of adolescents (Vergottini 2019). Their overarching objectives encompass support for adolescents' emotional well-being, improvement in academic performance, and the reduction of obstacles hindering the adolescents' overall welfare (NASW 2012). The selection of interventions employed by SSWers is guided by their continuous assessment of the adolescent's unique circumstances and needs. The significance of SSWers' roles within the educational institution is substantiated by the assertions of Pretorius (2016) and Huxtable (2022), who emphasize their specialized expertise in comprehending family and community systems (i.e., facilitating connections between adolescents and their families, as well as connecting them to vital community services essential for promoting learner success). Furthermore, SSWers assume a critical position as intermediaries, bridging the realms of school, home, and community. The focus is coordinating and orchestrating collaboration among all stakeholders to facilitate the realization of learners' full potential and their development into responsible citizens, thus contributing to the broader societal good (Kim 2012).

The expert knowledge and skills possessed by SSWers render them invaluable professionals who shoulder the responsibility of addressing the unique needs of learners who are at risk within the public school system, including ensuring social justice, safeguarding the rights of vulnerable populations such as foreign learners and those with learning disabilities,

who may be vulnerable to victimization, bullying, and ridicule by their peers (Altshuler and Webb 2009). Within the South African context, specifically in the Gauteng Province, the appointment of SSWers is a joint endeavor undertaken by the Gauteng Departments of Education and Social Development, with the specific mandate of rendering psychosocial services to learners in public schools (Lesesa 2022). Kemp (2014, 30) highlights the multifaceted roles of SSWers as

> identification of students in need of support; assessment of their distinct needs and challenges; interpretation and communication of these needs and challenges to school personnel, students, parents, and other relevant stakeholders; provision of direct and indirect services; engagement in consultation, collaboration, and coordination efforts; promotion of parental involvement; advocacy for community engagement; liaison with pertinent resources; facilitation of inter-professional teams and cooperation among various stakeholders.

Nguyen et al. (2022) posits that the interplay between the SSWer and the teacher should be characterized as a collaborative partnership aimed at addressing the diverse needs of adolescents. Acknowledging the distinct professional knowledge and skills the two professions bring to the table in designing supportive structures tailored to meet the needs of adolescents forms a collaborative alliance that is strategically oriented toward problem-solving (Pretorius 2020). It is worth noting that although the literature on LMICs has thus far provided limited insights into such teacher–SSWer partnerships, there are international bodies such as the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work that have actively endorsed the fostering of such collaborative alliances. Teachers and SSWers fulfill crucial roles in school settings. Teachers use a variety of strategies to reach students and help them understand the curriculum content, while SSWers utilize specialized knowledge and advanced skills to guide adolescents in developing resilience and understanding themselves and the world around them (Finigan-Carr and Shaia 2018; Pretorius 2020). Within the South African context, both categories of professionals have a role to play in supporting learners confronted with psychosocial challenges (i.e., stress, depression, anxiety, aggression, bullying and hyperactive behaviors, poor self-concept, poor self-esteem, and lack of confidence). However, there is a lack of contextual research on how these professionals work together in South Africa. Therefore, this pilot study focused on the perspectives of teachers and SSWers regarding their support for adolescents in a public secondary school. The collaborative partnerships between these professionals and other key stakeholders are highlighted in the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL), a Southern African conceptual framework under the purview of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Pretorius 2020; van der Elst et al. 2012). The primary goal of the framework is to establish a supportive learning

environment where educators and learners may improve their readiness to address the pressing issues confronting schools (e.g., high rates of adolescent pregnancies, violence in schools, and high learner dropout rates).

CSTL offers a helpful foundation for comprehending the range of hazards and influences that learners encounter as well as for tackling the issues that have a detrimental effect on their well-being (Department of Basic Education, n.d.). To tackle the challenges to learning, the framework acts as a road map for thorough, well-coordinated, and sustained multi-sectoral initiatives. Additionally, it guides all stakeholders on how to position their activities within the framework, leading to the efficient and systematic execution of care and support programs (Pretorius 2020). The ecological theory model, which acts as the cornerstone of this framework, provides the foundation for comprehending the multiple levels of effects that are experienced by children (Department of Basic Education and MIET Africa 2010). According to the theory, adolescents are influenced by a variety of factors, both good and bad, in their lives. These factors include those in their society, families, schools, and the communities within which they live, work and play. In light of this knowledge, CSTL can be used to detect and minimize possible risk factors in adolescents and in their social circles that harm their well-being. Moreover, the conceptual framework facilitates the identification of chances for the introduction of protective factors.

Methodology

The current study aimed to explore the perspectives of teachers and SSWers on supporting learners with psychosocial issues. To achieve this aim, this study used a qualitative exploratory research approach that Malmqvist et al. (2019) note as appropriate when exploring phenomena that are not clearly defined or that have been under-investigated or poorly understood. This exploratory study involves a smaller sample than anticipated and is therefore deemed appropriate to be a pilot study, to be followed by a bigger study.

Study Context and Participants

The study was carried out in a public secondary school setting in Johannesburg South and the Department of Social Development's school social work unit in Johannesburg, Gauteng. The selection of these study sites was intentional, as the first researcher was already familiar with the school and the school social work unit. The school itself is nestled in a peri-urban area with diverse socioeconomic conditions. The school social work unit functions in a specific Department of Social Development region, and school social work services are provided on a need-and-request basis by the different schools in the region.

A deliberate sampling strategy was employed, resulting in a total of six participants (i.e., three teachers and three SSWers; five females and one male; all identifying as Black) who were purposively selected. At the time of data collection, the teacher participants held the

position of Head of Grades teachers and were responsible for overseeing learners in grades 10 to 12 within the public secondary school. The teacher participants had approximately four years of experience in their respective positions as Head of Grades teachers. Conversely, the school social work participants were employed as social workers by the Department of Social Development, where their primary role involved providing essential services to various schools in the region. The SSWers averaged approximately 2.88 years of experience in delivering services to schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection. Consistent with the CSTL framework, the research instrument was a semi-structured interview schedule with questions related to approaches used by teachers and SSWers in supporting adolescents with psychosocial challenges. The schedule was pretested with one teacher and one social worker to ensure that the open-ended questions in the study were clear and easily comprehensible and to assess the feasibility of the research (Hurst et al. 2015). This process revealed that the participants understood the questions being asked and that the time allocated (forty-five minutes to one hour) for the interview was sufficient. The data collected during the pre-testing of the research instrument was not included in the data analysis. Following this procedure, interviews were held with the participants either in person or over the phone using voice calls. A digital audio recorder was used to audio record the interviews, which were subsequently transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022).

Data was analyzed using deductive approaches as a starting point, where the research data was analyzed on a question-by-question basis and in relation to the themes that have developed through the analysis and the literature review done for the study (Dawadi 2020). To maximize the overall depth of the analysis process, any new, intriguing information that came to light throughout this process was considered for this study to help create a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, ethical approval was granted by the University of the Witwatersrand HREC Non-Medical Committee (H20/06/16). Permissions were also obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), the Department of Social Development (DSD), and the school principal. With consent from the potential participants, the principal and the DSD social work manager shared the names and contact details of individuals who met the inclusion criteria: (1) Head of Grades teachers (i.e., having one year of experience in Head of Grade position and proficient in English); (2) Social Workers (i.e., having at least six months of experience in providing social work services to schools and registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions). Thereafter, using the participant information sheet that outlined the

study's ethical considerations (such as confidentiality, anonymity, and the opportunity to withdraw from the study), the first researcher then personally contacted each potential participant to extend an invitation to take part in the study. All participants who expressed interest in participating were scheduled for interviews, and formal consent was obtained.

Findings

The findings of this study have revealed four main themes (Figure 1), each of which is further subdivided into several subthemes that collectively offer insightful information on the viewpoints and experiences of teachers and SSWers. These themes not only show the multifaceted responsibilities that teachers and SSWers carry out and the complexities they experience in attempting to offer unwavering support to learners. The study also emphasizes the value of promoting collaborative relationships as the only way to support learners in their psychosocial development.

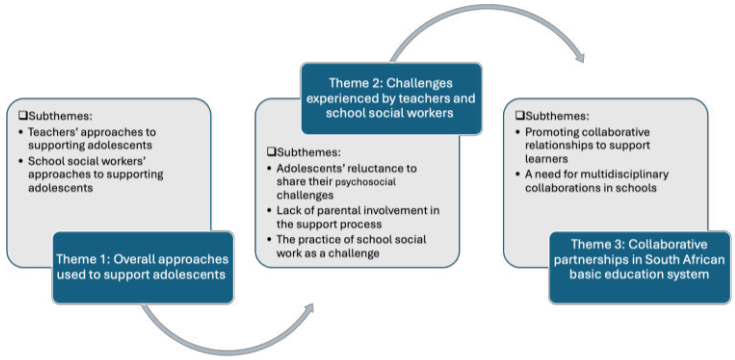

Figure 1: Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Overall Approaches Used to Support Adolescents

Subtheme 1: Teachers' Approaches to Supporting Adolescents

The findings from the teachers' experiences with supporting learners underscore their commitment to supporting learners' well-being in a variety of ways. Teachers generally prioritized creating safe and trusting environments where the learners can feel secure discussing their concerns. Teacher 1's response reflected this: "Firstly, you must try and make them feel protected and secure. I try to ease them so that they can relax until they can talk about everything. If you can't, assure them to say that whatever they're disclosing to you it's between you and them." Another teacher expressed that she took more proactive approaches that included discussing with the adolescents their psychosocial challenges:

> There are situations that I can't just sit with and not do anything, for instance; when a learner says they have suicidal thoughts. I speak to the learners and help them see how dangerous it is and it will lead to you to this and that…normally I keep everything to myself and try to help them where I can. (Teacher 2)

Teacher 3's response reflected that they went beyond their professional roles to support adolescents as they visited their homes: "We try the best way we can to try and assist them, we've visited homes to assist of learners; to see where the problem is, who the problem is and how best we can assist them." These extracts suggest sharing a common thread in respecting adolescents' autonomy and preserving the confidentiality of what is shared with them. Although unusual for the teachers' role, in instances where the adolescents' challenges stemmed from the home environment, teachers visited their homes to try to understand the contextual causes and explore ways to best support them.

Subtheme 2: School Social Workers' Approaches to Supporting Adolescents

The responses from the SSWers indicated that their roles in supporting learners with psychosocial challenges included conducting assessments and making referrals to other social work units and professionals. Consultations were first done with teachers to explore the learners' challenges in depth, before meeting with the adolescents for individualized intervention. As reported by Social Workers 1, "We do assessments. When we get there, they (teachers) tell us what the story of the learner is, and we check the accuracy of the story that has been given to us by the relevant parties. Once the assessment has been done, we do a short debriefing." As reported by School Social Worker 2, "We first do an assessment with teachers on what are the challenges and what they think needs immediate attention from us." In their direct assessment of the adolescents, School Social Worker 2 further explained: "We engage with them one on one trying to get to know their problems and what is it that they are going through; from this, we then come up with a program where we would address the main issues that the learners are presenting with."

While assessments and psychosocial support are provided to the adolescents, their intervention is short-term, reflecting the nature of the field of practice: "After [assessments], we will refer the case for the intervention depending on what the child is struggling with. We are not supposed to take more than a month with one case" (SSWer 1). School Social Worker 3's response to the nature of their work was similar: "We don't have long-term cases because we can't function that way. It is a challenge to maintain long-term intervention…cases that would prolong for 3 months, 6 months or even for years, then we don't take those cases." The referrals reported were made to social services support units, which would provide continuous support to the adolescents:

> If the case needs longer intervention or services that we are not able to provide, we refer to other social work units. For instance, if a child is coming from an abused home environment, we refer to another unit or Childline as it is not our duty to remove a child. (SSWer 1)

"We link them (learners) to these individuals so that they can get continuous support," (SSWer 2) and "If I would find that a learner has been sexually abused, I would refer them to an appropriate service provider, for example, the Teddy Bear Clinic" (SSWer 3). The SSWers' support approach also extended to conducting home visits to adolescents with psychosocial challenges, specifically for cases related to child abuse (i.e., sexual abuse and neglect) and issues related to the families' low socioeconomic standing: "We also do home visits for cases related to sexual abuse, neglect and poverty-related cases such as the parents not working" (Social Worker 1) and "if a learner needs shoes, school uniform or food parcels, then we can intervene for that time assist in providing for the learner" (SSWer 3).

Theme 2: Challenges Experienced by Teachers and School Social Workers

Subtheme 1: Adolescents' Reluctance to Share Their Psychosocial Challenges

The participants reported that while they attempted to provide support in one-on-one meetings, adolescents were often observed to be reluctant to share their challenges with them even when they seemed eager to: "With the learners, you find that they have confided in you, but there are things that they don't want to share [even though] you can see that this child wants to speak out" (Teacher 2). The adolescents were reported to be untruthful: "[challenge would be] dealing with reluctant learners. Some take weeks before they open up to you…while others will give you stories that are not truthful. They lie and change stories, which makes it difficult for a way forward to be developed" (SSWer 1). Teacher 3 reflected the following in their efforts to visit the learners' homes to talk to their parents: "And you have learners that fear and say no ma'am don't come to my house; if you come to my house my father will hit me," alluding that the adolescents were uncomfortable with their efforts for fear of the treatment they would receive from the parents. School Social Worker 1 was of the view that adolescent learners struggle with sharing with teachers who are older: "The learners are not comfortable and open with them [teachers]. Especially in schools where there are older teachers."

Subtheme 2: Lack of Parental Involvement in the Support Process

To further ascertain the challenges that they experienced when providing support to the adolescents, the participants expressed that parental involvement in the support process was lacking as parents had work commitments. In some instances, they did not want to be "bothered" and expressed discomfort with the "interference" of the participants in their home situations: "Parents' involvement, sometimes it is not there at all. You'd ask the parent to be

involved, but they would tell you that they are working" (Teacher 2), and "Sometimes their parents or their guardians…don't think that you should be calling them or bothering them with these things and that you're just interfering in their homes" (Teacher 3). Following the need to probe into alleged cases such as child neglect and physical abuse through conducting home visits, School Social Worker 3 expressed that parents were uncooperative and resistant to them:

> [a challenge] would be the co-corporation from the parents. There would be parents that would not cooperate especially when a case is referred to me and I'm told by a teacher that there is neglect that they are picking up or they have seen some injuries on the child and the child does not want to talk. Then when you go conduct a home visit parents become resistant.

To help parents better care and support their children, School Social Worker 2 acknowledged that a parental skills program had been developed but that the participation from parents was poor regardless of accommodations made:

> they (parents) don't participate the way we want them to participate. Sometimes we would have a parental skills program…[we]have identified that there is a problem that learners are experiencing…and for us to address it we need to bring in the parents for a parental skills program. We have done such programs in the past and you find that only 20 percent of parents in the school attend. Whether we do it during the week or whether we do it on a weekend, parents' participation in their learners' academic or psychosocial issues is just a serious challenge.

Subtheme 3: The Practice of School Social Work as a Challenge

According to the SSWers, the provision of their services was challenging as schools were not accommodative in terms of having a designated room for SSWers to provide intervention with adolescents. Sometimes, SSWers had to provide intervention in teachers' offices, therefore compromising confidentiality:

> [schools] don't have space where we can see the learners. The school will just call you and say [we] must use one of the teachers' offices. Sometimes you find that the teacher is there. The learners are always uncomfortable to talk as they fear that maybe someone will pass by and see them or a teacher will come in. (SSWer 1)

and in some instances, the intervention had to be provided by the reception: "We don't have resources when we go to schools to see learners where you sit at the reception, and everybody is up and down" (SSWer 3). Another SSWer raised the issue of some teachers not being welcoming to psychosocial support, alluding that teachers may be the reasons why adolescents experience psychosocial challenges:

> Educators themselves are not open to learners having psychosocial support in school…they feel threatened or feel too exposed because sometimes challenges that learners are experiencing are caused by teachers themselves, you still find cases of teachers who are dating learners, teachers who are proposing to learners, teachers that are just bullying learners or being abusive to learners for no reason. (SSWer 2)

Specifically, this response suggests that teachers may be engaging in unethical behaviors that affect adolescents during their development.

The SSWers also reflected on challenges experienced within the DSD that impeded their effectiveness in providing social work services in schools. School Social Worker 3 expressed that the lack of cars to visit schools acted as a barrier to their school responsibilities: "We just have 3 cars and [in the] whole unit, we are a group of 26 social workers…we are servicing more [than] 1500 schools around JHB area." Confusion around the role of SSWer, particularly among other social work professionals not in the field of school social work were reported by (SSWer 2):

> [they] don't really understand the role of school social work because you find challenges when you refer a case as a [school] social worker to another social worker they feel like why she didn't do this [case] on her own. They don't understand our role that we work with children, but our job is to just access and identify, then refer.

The participant went further on to explain that

> it has to be another social worker's role and it is also impractical because imagine if I have a court date tomorrow and then tomorrow a school calls me and tells me that a child was stabbed, I need to come to the school, children are traumatized and all that. (SSWer 2)

Theme 3: Collaborative Partnerships in South African Basic Education System

Subtheme 1: Promoting Collaborative Relationships to Support Learners

In efforts to holistically support learners, the participants reflected on existing collaborative practices with external organizations and support professionals. These collaborative partnerships developed after noticing the challenges that adolescents experience. Due to gangsterism and substance use, School Social Work 2 said, "We also get former convicts who are now rehabilitated, and they are now motivational speakers to speak to the learner as one of the challenges that we have picked up, especially with the boys is the issue of gangsterism and substance abuse"; and Teacher 3 reported:

> We have contacted the South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA) to come in. We have had many drugs and rehabilitation people come in to speak to the learners and we had the clinics and nurses come in.

> You can see these learners have issues, they need to talk to somebody, and they don't have anyone to talk to.

Outsourcing support to provide coaching was acknowledged by Teacher 2: "There is also a life coach who comes to give a motivational talk to learners and concentrates mostly on grade 11s." Specific support was also outsourced for mental health: "We also invited people from the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), people that will come give learners support regarding whatever challenges that the school has been going through of challenges that are dominant amongst the learners" (SSWer 2) and

> We had Lifeline…they would counsel the learners experiencing challenges. We would identify them and then they would sit down and counsel them [and] there was also a lady who is a social worker who was helping us. She would ask me which children are experiencing issues, then she sits down with them to coach them. (Teacher 2)

Lastly, to support adolescents from poor households, School Social Worker 3 said: "We link them up with the Sustainable Livelihood unit, which helps them with food parcels and school uniforms."

Subtheme 2: A Need for Multidisciplinary Collaborations in Schools

Although the findings reflected that various kinds of support were provided to adolescents by teachers, SSWers, and external organizations and professionals, the participants further echoed the need for additional support that reflects multidisciplinary collaboration. According to Teacher 2, interventions should start at the community level, where the community members are responsible for the upbringing of a child: "[supporting learners starts] here at the community level which we live in. I grew up in times when my parent was a neighbor's child's parent. I knew that if other parents found me smoking, they would definitely hit me. If communities can work together." Teacher 3 supported this sentiment:

> I think it's [the] society and the whole community, it is not an individual problem, and it is not a learner problem. Parents or guardians cannot help with their children when they have these problems so it's seriously a community issue. People need to rally together and see how best we can guide the youth.

Teacher 2 expressed that parents are responsible for supporting their children: "I think parents should take a stand. Teachers are trying, but unfortunately, there is [only] so much we can do; we can do a little bit of coaching and helping those learners, but the parents can also work together in the household to discipline the child." Similarly, School Social Worker 3 noted: "At the core [of support] is the family structure." The participant further explained that in addition to providing academic instruction, teachers' responsibility in this

collaboration would be to identify struggling adolescents: "as the children spend a lot of time at school, [teachers] would be the first to notice these challenges."

Reflecting on support by social workers and psychologists, one of the participants expressed the significance of these professionals: "When you tell them (learners) you are a social worker, they start talking because they know of confidentiality. I think psychologists are also responsible for dealing with the emotions that learners experience, especially in cases of sexual abuse and maybe teenage pregnancy" (SSWer 1). School Social Worker 3 stressed the need for collaboration and took into consideration that SSWers are not based in school: "There is no single person who is responsible for this. There must be a multidisciplinary team (MDT) approach. For me as a social worker, I am based in the office, and I only visit the school every now and then." Expanding on the need for SSWers to be based in schools, Teacher 2 reported that SSWers would help support learners with psychosocial challenges:

> Currently, we don't have a social worker but if [we did], it would be helpful. So, if there is somebody who can come and help the teachers [in] dealing specifically with these things (challenges), it would be helpful. It also must be someone who does it regularly, not a once-off thing.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion of the findings is presented in relation to the identified themes.

Theme 1: Overall Approaches Used to Support Adolescents

Findings in this study regarding teachers' approaches to supporting adolescents correspond to Mælan et al.'s (2018) and Atkins et al.'s (2010) conclusions that teachers have a role in providing non-academic support. This is because teachers spend more time with learners and are therefore more likely to be the first to notice when adolescents' well-being is affected. In their efforts, teachers in this study prioritized creating safe and trusting environments for adolescents to discuss their concerns while ensuring confidentiality (Allen et al. 2013; Ibrahim and El Zaatari 2020; Uslu and Gizir 2017). Considering that South African SSWers are not based in public schools, they clarified that their role with adolescents in the school was short-term and that their support approaches included (1) consultation with teachers first, (2) conducting assessments with adolescents to explore their challenges, and (3) providing direct short-term intervention to adolescents. On completion of the assessment, they provide the necessary interventions and refer to appropriate service providers. These findings related to SSWers' approaches are consistent with the roles of SSWers from a global context (Huxtable 2022) and on a local scale (Vergottini and Weyers 2020). Both teachers and SSWers in this study indicated that they conducted home visits to adolescents' homes. While this is a SSWers' role, as evidenced in the literature (e.g., Allen and Tracy 2008; Cook 2019),

teachers seem to be uncertain about where their role ends in supporting learners and professional boundaries. Mælan et al.'s (2018) study acknowledges that teachers should support adolescents (i.e., mental health) by identifying learners with concerns and providing an inclusive nurturing school and classroom environments and indicates that there is a need for a boundary between the responsibility and role of teachers and those of other professionals. The consequences of teachers taking up this responsibility are to create an extra burden on their already heavy academic and administrative workload, thereby creating role-related pressures (Mazzer and Rickwood 2014). In this approach, Primus (2009) suggested that SSWers should conduct home visits to assess the reasons behind adolescents' misbehavior and prolonged absences, providing valuable information to the school or district. These visits also serve as a means of addressing school-related issues when teachers cannot reach parents, ensuring concerns are investigated and needs are assessed.

Theme 2: Challenges Experienced by Teachers and School Social Workers

Participants reported facing several challenges when supporting psychosocially challenged adolescents. Among them is the reluctance of adolescents to discuss their psychosocial issues. This supports evidence showing that adolescents struggle with communicating mental health and well-being (Gulliver, Griffiths, and Christensen 2010). We assume the adolescents' reluctance to consider, seek, and use support is due to mistrust of teachers, fear of asking for help, and sensitive concerns. These findings may not be unique to South Africa, as other studies have related adolescents' hesitation and limited use of support to the stigma of requesting help. According to Bojuwoye et al. (2014), mistrust of teachers may be linked to negative responses to support requests, adolescents' views that teachers were too busy to listen, and earlier experiences of impatience and dismissal. These challenges can have significant implications for the effectiveness of psychosocial support and suggest areas for improvement (Bojuwoye et al. 2014). For instance, mistrust may lead to adolescents withholding information about their personal problems and difficulties, hindering teachers' ability to provide tailored support. This can result in reduced help-seeking behaviors for adolescents, the limited rapport between themselves and teachers, and, ultimately, missed opportunities for referral to SSWers to provide intervention.

A lack of parental involvement in the process of providing support for the adolescents was also found to be an additional challenge. It was revealed that this stemmed from the employment obligations of the parents or their uneasiness with the involvement of social service professionals and teachers in their family matters. The absence of parental involvement has direct implications for the success of school-based psychosocial support initiatives that are facilitated by SSWers. This is because parental involvement is often important in addressing the issues that adolescents confront (Mao, Zang, and Zhang 2020; Wang and Sheikh-Khalil 2014). The absence of parental involvement results in a gap in the support system, which, in turn, restricts the range of interventions that can be implemented.

Taking into consideration the fact that SSWers are not based in schools, the challenges that they encountered were related to access to the school and accommodation of social worker services, inadequate DSD school social work unit resources, and confusion around the role of SSWers. Previous research in other South African provinces (Kemp 2014; Vergottini 2019) turned up similar contextual challenges. This study indicated that SSWers had no designated spaces to provide intervention nor cars to frequently get to schools, which we believe can reduce their effectiveness. The lack of designated spaces can have serious consequences for adolescent confidentiality, rapport-building, and social work service quality. When adolescents are seen in reception areas or with teachers, their conversations may be overheard by peers or school officials. This breach of confidentiality affects trust and can deter adolescents from getting help. This might cause discomfort and anxiety, making it hard for the SSWers to connect with them. Unsafe or less private spaces may prevent adolescents from sharing their thoughts and feelings, hindering the therapeutic process. Insufficient cars can force SSWers to prioritize some schools over others, exacerbating adolescent educational and emotional inequities. This violates children's right to social services, which Dutschke (2006) defines as interventions that help people deal with social issues caused by social, economic, or political changes. Like Dutschke, we believe DSD should invest in cars and hire more SSWers to address social issues at their source and make school social services more preventive than remedial. Finally, some teachers resisted social work services in the school and were unclear about SSW roles. The lack of clear roles and communication with teachers could lead to misperceptions and hamper teacher–SSWer collaboration and hinder service delivery and the well-being of learners. Similarly to studies in other contexts (e.g., Beddoe 2019 [New Zealand]), SSWers reported issues linked to interprofessional differences, being hosted by the school, and role misunderstanding. Clear communication, professional development, and a shared awareness of SSWers' importance in education are needed to address these challenges.

Theme 3: Collaborative Partnerships in South African Basic Education System

The findings from this study shed light on the needed collaborative partnerships between relevant departments, e.g., the Department of Basic Education and the DSD, teachers, SSWers, external organizations, and members of the MDT. In the context of South Africa, these collaborations are important for the CSTL initiative (Pretorius 2020; Swartz et al. 2016). Recognizing that CSTL aims to prevent and mitigate factors that negatively affect vulnerable learners' performance, advancement, and enrollment in schools by tackling learning and teaching barriers (Department of Basic Education, n.d.), the identified partnerships in this study aim to holistically support adolescents with psychosocial challenges.

In this study, it was evident that collaborative efforts were already in existence within the school system and that what was needed was the implementation of an MDT approach to reinforce and enhance these collaborations. These noteworthy collaborations primarily

revolved around addressing issues such as substance abuse and gangsterism, mental health concerns, and offering coaching support to adolescents. Participants in the study indicated that services concerning these issues were provided by a variety of external resources, including former convicts who had undergone rehabilitation, SANCA (an organization focused on the prevention and treatment of substance use disorders), SADAG, and Lifeline (organizations providing mental health support). Furthermore, the Sustainable Livelihood unit and professional life coaches were also involved in this collaborative effort. The inclusion of these external resources signifies a recognition that some learners may require specialized support that extends beyond what schools can provide independently. This further aligns with recommendations found in the literature, which underline the critical importance of engaging mental health professionals and addiction specialists in school-based interventions (Gulliver, Griffiths, and Christensen 2010; Weist et al. 2017).

While the concept of bringing former convicts into the school premises to interact with adolescents may invite criticism, we argue that individuals with personal experiences related to these challenges may guide and inspire adolescents to make positive changes in their lives. Such an approach, when implemented thoughtfully, can serve as a source of empowerment and guidance for adolescents facing crisis. Furthermore, the involvement of the Sustainable Livelihood unit in providing essential resources, including food parcels and school uniforms, underscores the acknowledgment of the profound impact of poverty and deprivation on adolescents' well-being and academic success. This aligns with studies emphasizing the need for comprehensive support, which encompasses addressing the socioeconomic determinants of mental health (Lund et al. 2022). In essence, these collaborative partnerships represent a multifaceted approach that not only recognizes the complex needs of adolescents but also seeks to address them comprehensively and effectively.

The participants in this study also highlighted the need for additional support in schools to address the psychosocial challenges faced by adolescents. They called for an MDT collaboration that recognizes the roles of various stakeholders in promoting the well-being of adolescents. An MDT approach further acknowledges that adolescents' challenges often extend beyond the purview of a single discipline and require a coordinated effort to address the challenges (Dogra et al. 2017). The suggestions presented by the participants reflect a commitment to a more holistic and comprehensive approach to support. Some participants emphasized the importance of involving the community in supporting adolescents. They stressed the idea that the responsibility for nurturing and guiding children should not fall solely on parents but should extend to the wider community. This perspective aligns with the concept that it takes a "village [to raise] a child," where community members collectively contribute to the upbringing and well-being of young people (Davison, Michaelson, and Pickett 2015). Engaging the community in supporting adolescents can help create a more nurturing and supportive environment beyond the school.

The importance of parents' support for their children was also underlined by the participants. They maintained that parents need to be proactive in helping their children with their psychological difficulties. This viewpoint is consistent with the notion that parents are the primary caregivers and have a significant influence on the development of their children (Bronfenbrenner 1979). To overcome psychosocial difficulties, parents must be encouraged to be involved in their children's lives and offer guidance and emotional support. Moreover, the responsibility of teachers in identifying adolescents who might be experiencing psychological challenges was acknowledged by the participants. They emphasized how crucial it is for teachers to be watchful and proactive in identifying signs of distress in adolescents. This responsibility is consistent with research showing that teachers frequently act as learners' first line of defense when it comes to recognizing and addressing mental health concerns (Weist et al. 2017). However, it also underscores the need for teachers to receive training and support for recognizing and responding to psychosocial challenges effectively and referring adolescents to appropriate care and support. In identifying adolescents with psychosocial challenges, teachers should consider or observe externalizing symptoms that are disruptive to the learning environment; changes in the usual behaviors of the adolescents or the presence of abnormal behaviors when compared with their peers; difficulty in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships; and a lack of progress in learning (Paternite 2005). Like Vieira et al.'s (2014) study, we suggest that any training provided to teachers to help them identify the need for psychosocial support for adolescents must include content on psychosocial issues faced by adolescents and their impact, expected normal and abnormal behaviors in adolescence, information about when and where to refer adolescents with signs of psychosocial challenges, and any contextually relevant content suggested by the school.

The study further revealed a consensus among the participants about the need for SSWers in school settings. This was through recognizing the pivotal role that SSWers play and the participants discussing the importance of having them stationed in schools to offer adolescents continuous support. This would ensure consistency in helping adolescents and early intervention and assistance for those facing psychological and social issues (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, and Kim 2013). To overcome any interprofessional challenges that might arise between teachers and SSWers, as noted in the literature (Isaksson and Larsson 2017), and develop a common ground, both professional teams must consult with each other and engage in the practice of brainstorming ideas. Psychologists were also found to be a significant resource in the collaboration approach to supporting adolescents. These professionals in the school setting provide services to adolescents, teachers, and parents that include direct and indirect intervention practices. Specific services in supporting adolescents include assessment and program planning; in-service training; school development; supervision; and consultation with teachers, parents, and other professionals (Farrell et al. 2005). Psychologists' role is important in the school's ecosystem as they consult with key stakeholders such as principals, teachers, parents, and school governing bodies to identify and

address psychosocial aspects affecting adolescents (Moolla and Lazarus 2014). In conjunction with school social work services, they would also assist in the development of school programs focusing on issues including violence, study skills, reading, sexuality, substance abuse, and classroom management.

Conclusion

Located in South Africa, this pilot study has provided significant insights into the complementary approaches used by teachers and SSWers in the process of supporting adolescents with psychosocial challenges. Teachers initially share their observations with SSWers, who then conduct assessments and make appropriate referrals for cases that require long-term intervention and services that are not within the purview of school social work. Both the teachers and the SSWers encountered problems in their practice approaches. These challenges included the adolescents' reluctance to share the challenges they were experiencing and lack of parental involvement. Collaborative practices between teachers and SSWers in supporting adolescents' psychosocial functioning are hindered by the contextual challenges that exist in schools and at DSD. In recognizing the complex nature of psychosocial challenges, the research findings reflected on the lack of multidisciplinary collaboration and argued for coordinated efforts in the schools, which include the community, parents, teachers, and SSWers. This research provides direction for a comprehensive study on collaborative practices in schools. In addition, we further argue for teachers' training focused on identifying adolescents with psychosocial challenges and following processes to refer those adolescents to SSWers to assess and either attend to the issues or refer the adolescents to other resources in the community. Clear guidelines for the roles of teachers and SSWers need to be outlined and readily available so that effective services are provided to adolescents. To allow for and strengthen the collaborations between teachers and SSWers, the deployment of SSWers in school settings in South Africa has become non-negotiable.

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The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete essential authoring tasks in this manuscript.

Informed Consent

The authors have obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gift Khumalo: Lecturer, Centre for General Education, Faculty of Arts and Design, Durban University of Technology, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
Corresponding Author's Email: giftk@dut.ac.za

Edmarie Pretorius: Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa
Email: edmarie.pretorius@wits.ac.za