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Examining the Challenges Faced by School Social Workers in Selected Township Schools in City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality:

An NPO Perspective

Funeka Makholwa

The Discipline of Social Work, School of Human & Community Development,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa

Emmison Muleya*

The Discipline of Social Work, School of Human & Community Development,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa

[*Corresponding author]

Abstract

School social workers are essential in the educational environment, particularly because they work beyond the purview of social welfare initiatives. Yet they encounter challenges which limit delivery of school social work services. This small-scale study aims to explore challenges school social workers encounter while attempting to carry out social welfare activities in schools. A qualitative approach was utilised alongside the case study design for the study. A purposive sampling technique from a sample of school social workers at an Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) was used. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews utilising an interview guide, a total of five social workers from an NPO and one vice principal was used for the study. The study's results, which were derived from a thematic analysis of the data gathered, showed that school social workers in township schools encounter a number of difficulties, including a lack of resources, a heavy workload, systemic fragmentation, and a lack of knowledge about their roles in the educational environment. The findings of the study further highlighted how school social worker receive limited support, only relying on community involvement and sometimes school districts. Through the interviews, some recommendations from participants highlighted the need for additional funding aimed at first employing more school based social workers and funding towards resources for effective implementation of social welfare initiatives. Reforming policies between the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Social Development and institutionalizing school social work were also emphasized by the findings. In addition to challenging the governing mechanisms, the study's recommendations will help school social workers effectively handle problems and deliver their services.

Keywords

School social work, Social welfare, Challenges, Township schools

INTRODUCTION

For more than a century, school social work—a recognized profession worldwide, particularly in the United States of America (USA)—has played a crucial role in the educational setting (Constable, 2009). Its main goal has been acknowledged as interacting with, organizing, and persuading communities, families, and schools to contribute to children's social development. Despite being a relatively new area of social work practice in South Africa, school social work has seen significant advancements over the past 20 years thanks to joint efforts by the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces' Departments of Basic Education (DBE) and Social Development, as well as non-profit organizations, to guarantee the provision of psychosocial services in schools (Pretorius, 2016). However, as Pretorius (2016) postulates, the operationalisation of school social work practices across provinces in South Africa fluctuates and is inconsistent. Despite this, the DBE acknowledged the critical role that school social work can play within the education sector by

developing a psychosocial support model for South African schools (DBE, 2021). Implicit within this psychosocial model is acknowledgement that the social work profession has a lot to offer in schools. Psychosocial support is seen as a crucial aspect of learner wellbeing, alongside health, nutrition, sport, recreation, culture and support for learners with special needs. While educators help learners reach their full potential by imparting information, skills, and values and social workers may promote learners' wellbeing and prepare them for learning (Huxtable, 2022).

The field of social work is diverse and includes a range of practice areas. Social workers are specialists with training in helping people deal with life's obstacles and enhance their well-being on an individual, family, and community level. Driven by a profound dedication to social justice, social workers function within an environment that upholds the intrinsic value and dignity of every individual. Social workers can play a variety of responsibilities to protect people's wellbeing. They are, in a way, present in many fields that support the efficient provision of care and counselling to those in need. Social workers play a variety of roles that change depending on the needs of the people they assist (Asamoah et al., 2021). These roles include advocates, counsellors, mediators, and educators. Having said that, they also work well in educational settings where they can support social welfare programs for both communities and schools.

In the field of basic education, school social work plays a critical role in addressing a variety of issues that negatively impact the school environment. Even with the psychosocial initiatives put in place by school social workers, school social workers still encounter several difficulties when applying the different social welfare programmes into practice in the classroom. School social workers in nations such as Canada face challenges when attempting to provide psychosocial services to native learners because of cultural differences and differing perspectives on certain aspects of tradition (Sinclair, 2020). When working with immigrant students, school social workers can find it difficult to adopt a culturally competent approach. This leads to the problem of position ambiguity; in certain nations (Kelly, 2021), school social workers perform a variety of occupations, including teaching, administrative, and disciplinary work, while in others, they are viewed as mental health specialists. The application of welfare measures in schools may be further hampered by the lack of distinct and defined duties for school social workers. In China, for instance, school social workers are sometimes required to perform many responsibilities, which makes it more difficult for them to concentrate on their social work duties. Because they must assume numerous roles that are outside of what they should be doing in schools, role confusion further distances the social workers from their professional identities (LAU, 2020). Considering the sub-Saharan region school social workers are considered an essential resource, the one impediment they face is the lack of resources given to them and being understaffed in many instances (Kiweewa et al., 2017). In some cases, school social workers face challenges of sociodemographic challenges, the excessive workload due to only few being employed and, in some cases, administrative issues, thus this hinders the success of the implementation of social welfare programmes (Alotaibi et al., 2020). Township schools in South Africa, especially those in City of Johannesburg, deal with a variety of issues related to socioeconomic inequality, historical legacies, and cultural nuances. Amidst these intricacies, school social workers stand out as essential frontline personnel, charged with the duty of attending to the many needs of kids and creating an atmosphere that is favourable to learning and wellbeing (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020).

In South Africa, apartheid left a legacy that has historically defined the education sector, leading to persistent differences in the distribution of resources, access to education, and community infrastructure (Pretorius, 2016). Township schools, which are essential centres of learning, struggle with the fallout from this past. Issues such as high student-teacher ratios, restricted access to learning materials, and a high frequency of socioeconomic barriers among the learner population are some of the indications of the fallout from the past (Setlhare, 2016). A number of studies (Pretorius, 2016; Vergottini and Weyers, 2020; Boboyi, 2024; Khumalo and Pretorius, 2024) have acknowledged the critical role school social workers play in the wellbeing of learners and in addressing barriers to learning.

Despite the acknowledged importance of school social workers in addressing these concerns, there is a dearth of literature on the difficulties social workers, particularly those in Johannesburg, have when providing school social work interventions. Nonetheless, concentrating primarily on the difficulties encountered by school learners and leaving out systemic issues that might negatively impact the quality of services offered by school social workers in schools, may result in ineffective service rendering. Interventions that can meet the requirements of both students and school social workers are necessary to promote a safe, encouraging learning and working environment (Pretorius, 2016; Khumalo & Pretorius, 2024). To combat this knowledge gap, the complexity of the challenges faced by school social workers in the course of their work within the framework of social welfare programs was examined in this study. Examining issues such as the lack of sufficient resources, burn out and brain fog will provide insightful information on the dynamics of social work in township schools, which will aid in the creation of interventions and policy recommendations that are appropriate for the given context. While research has been done on school children and their psychosocial issues (Ntombela et al., 2022; Khumalo & Pretorius, 2024), the main aim of this article is to explore challenges faced by social workers in one NGO while providing support to learners at selected township schools in Johannesburg. Based on this overall aim, the corollary objectives were to examine accessibility of support services and resources available to school social workers to facilitate programme implementation and to elicit from social workers their views on changes that could be made to address the given challenges in selected schools in Johannesburg.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

The ecological systems theory, which Urie Bronfenbrenner created, was pertinent to this investigation. Human growth is influenced by a variety of environmental systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, chronosystem, macrosystem,

and exo-system (Darling, 2007). The core tenet of the ecological systems theory is that people are part of a nested web of environmental systems that affect their growth, behaviour, and general well-being. First among these systems is the microsystem, which is a system made up of a person's primary interactions with others (Lehmann & Coady, 2001). Examples of microsystems include families, workplaces, institutions, and peer groups. School social workers have personal interactions with learners, educators, staff, and parents of students enrolled in the school. School social workers at township schools may face numerous difficulties as a direct outcome of numerous socioeconomic problems. For example, there is a significant imbalance in the learner-to-social worker ratio in township schools. This could lead to a high caseload, which could therefore make it more difficult to execute social work projects in schools (Sinai-Glazer & Krane, 2020). Numerous variables contribute to this disparity in ratios; frequently, this is because there aren't enough social workers assigned to schools.

The mesosystem, which takes into account the connections between an individual's microsystems, is the second system. The relationship between a person's home and workplace settings serves as an illustration of this. In this case, school social workers can interact with the school environment as well as the broader community. The link between the township and the school is a result of the various socioeconomic problems that exist in the community, which directly affects the educational environment. Things like unemployment, poverty, and violence can have a big impact on the school and how everyone who operates there feels about it. School social workers focus heavily on developing programs that address social concerns in communities while combating the lack of resources, even though they also work closely with schools to address various learner-teacher conflicts (Lee, 2021).

The next system is the exo-system which is a larger system that influences an individual passively through things like local laws, parent's place of employment, and resources in the community. Within this setting, school social workers' work in schools is influenced by larger social structures and policies. This covers community infrastructure, health care accessibility, community structure, and government-enforced policies. School social workers in townships frequently provide their services to underfunded schools—schools that the government frequently overlooks. Due to their constant need to outsource resources to carry out initiatives in schools successfully (Skhosana, 2020), these problems frequently make it difficult for school social workers to conduct social welfare programs in schools.

The macrosystem, which includes sociological and cultural elements like laws, customs, and socioeconomic status, is the next system. This system examines the sociological and cultural factors that affect the people who work in schools. Examining South Africa's history, and specifically that of Soweto, apartheid had a profound effect on the community at large, contributing to the socioeconomic challenges that schools and school social workers face today. The way that school social workers implement their projects is influenced by various issues, including poverty, unemployment, inequality, and the stigma associated with seeking counselling (Lee, 2021). The way that members of the school community view therapy and other community welfare activities is also influenced by cultural considerations.

The final system is called the chronosystem; it is a system that considers the scope of time and how an individual's surroundings and circumstances change over time (Lehmann & Coady, 2001). This system contains effects that arise from the passage of time. The occupation evolves with the passage of time. While providing social welfare activities, school social workers frequently must deal with changes that come with time. The COVID-19 epidemic has affected school social workers' use of initiatives in recent times. The availability of therapeutic services in the educational setting may have been impacted by the switch from in-person to online counselling. Considering the Township community and its difficulties, such as the lack of funding for internet access. As a result of the pandemic, existing socio-economic later worsened due to unemployment in the community that further resulted to chronic poverty (Khowa et al., 2022).

Although they work inside the school's microsystem, school social workers are also impacted by its mesosystem and macrosystem. Comprehending the impact of these systems and their interplay in this context may illuminate the difficulties faced by school social workers. It was therefore important to utilise this theory as it is relevant in understanding the different systems that come into play when dealing with challenges faced by social workers in Johannesburg township schools.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), there are three types of research approaches: mixed methods, qualitative, and quantitative. This study employed a qualitative approach. This is because this research attempted to investigate the difficulties faced by school social workers, and the qualitative methodology concentrates on gathering information that is all about comprehending various concepts, people's lived experiences, and perspectives on issues or concepts in society (Leavy, 2022).

Research Design

The case study research design was chosen for this investigation. A case study is a sort of investigation in which a researcher thoroughly examines a case, which is frequently an initiative, event, activity, procedure, or one or more people (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This kind of research is common in several fields, most notably evaluation. Time and activity constraints apply to cases, and researchers use a variety of data collection methods to collect thorough data over a long period of time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because of the study's practice setting, the single case study approach was selected. The goal of the study is to comprehend the difficulties experienced by school social workers, particularly those who are delivering psychosocial support services from a Johannesburg non-profit.

Population, Sample, Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

The entire group or assembly of individuals, objects, or events that the researcher is interested in and that possess certain traits is referred to as a "population" (Roestenburg et al., 2021). It represents the larger population from which a sample is drawn. Qualified school social workers engaged within the confines of social welfare interventions made up the study's population.

A sample is a portion of the population from which data is gathered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because gathering data from every person of the entire population is either difficult or impossible, therefore using a sample makes it easier to conduct research. The study comprised school social workers that work under the NPO which is Youth Opportunities South Africa (YOSA) which services various schools across Johannesburg such as Soweto and Tembisa. In this study five school social workers with at the least 1-year experience in working within the school setting and a school principal made the study's sample. There is generally few school social workers with the Department of Social Development having only forty-eight social workers in 2013 (Pretorius, 2016). NPOs have a much limited number of social workers and the staff component at the selected NPO is approximately 10 social workers who work with about 20 student social workers that undertake social work practice field instructions courses on an annual basis. Therefore, when a saturation point was reached; that is, when acquiring new data no longer yields novel insights or discloses previously undiscovered properties, the process of obtaining data came to an end (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) and at this point the sample size of five was sufficient. This sample ensured feasibility, especially with limited resources and time constraints. This smaller sample allowed for a focused data collection and one participant as part of the sample of potential participants representing the target population was interviewed using the tool and feedback, the researcher and the research supervisor reviewed the effectiveness of the tool. This participant did not form part of those counted in the study. The testing enhanced the reliability, cultural sensitivity, validity and the robustness of the study. After the review and sharpening of the instrument, the researcher was then given permission to continue with the study.

In this study the sampling procedure that was used was the non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling. The use of purposive sampling (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016) is restricted to groups of persons who met the researcher's requirements or who are the only ones who had the necessary information. The kind of purposive sampling that was applied in this study is purposive sampling, which entails selecting respondents who are most ideally situated or in the greatest position to supply the necessary data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Inclusion Criteria

- Any gender
- Aged 21 years and above.
- Should be a school social worker at the agency (YOSA)
- Qualified social worker
- Have at least one year experience working in schools.
- School principal or vice principal

Exclusion Criteria

- Not school principal/vice principal
- Not school based social worker in Soweto
- Aged 20 and below

Data Collection

The participant information sheet, which contained details about the study and the requirements for participants who met them, was used to recruit participants. After completing an internship at the agency, the first author obtained management approval to carry out the study. The interviews were conducted at the agency's convenient location. Semi-structured interviews and an interview guide were used to gather data. This was in a form of one-on-one face to face interviews as they are among the most often used data collection methods in qualitative research because they allow for the acquisition of highly individualized information directly from the sources (Roestenburg et al., 2021). Interviews that are semi-structured combine elements of unstructured and structured interviewing. A semi-structured interview consists of a few planned questions with room for deviation and elaboration from the interviewer and the interviewee to enable the exploration of deeper levels of thinking (Roestenburg et al., 2021). Each participant was given a letter of consent before participating in the interview, the researchers explained all the contents of the research and answered any questions of concerns that participants had. The researchers applied some of the important aspects of social work such as building rapport with the client, in this the application of active-listening and open communication was applied (Hepworth et al., 2017). The researchers also ensured to reiterate the aspect of autonomy and confidentiality throughout the study, the participants were reassured that their personal details will not be shared with the public in the final research report. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

The information gathered from semi-structured interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible and well-liked qualitative technique for detecting, assessing, and summarizing patterns or themes in data (Braun

& Clarke, 2012). The process of coding and interpreting data is made simpler with a thematic analysis, which offers an introduction to qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The technique was chosen because it permits a methodical and comprehensive examination of participants' answers (Braun & Clarke, 2012), allowing the researcher to spot recurrent themes of relevance and meaning pertaining to the subject. The following is how the topic analysis was conducted:

Data Extraction

Getting acquainted with the data preparation, which includes evaluating the interview recordings and transcriptions, is the first step in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To fully comprehend the viewpoints and experiences of the participants, the researchers fully immersed herself in the data throughout this procedure. This involved reading through earlier work to fully comprehend what is required by the overall study.

Initial Coding

As soon as the data is ready, preliminary coding will take place to methodically identify and group portions of text that are pertinent to the study's objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This step involved finding patterns, themes and ideas in the gathered data during interviews and thus allocating codes to represent the highlighted components. The data that was gathered was further segmented in various codes by the researchers to further categorise the gathered information into various topics.

Theme Development

Themes were established through repeated analysis and interpretation after the first coding. To create more comprehensive themes that reflect meaningful or significant trends in the data, similar codes were grouped together (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Based on the themes' applicability to the study's goals as well as their coherence and consistency throughout the dataset, the researchers improved them. This entails assessing the themes critically to make sure they accurately convey the essence of the data and are in line with the study objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The themes of the study were aligned in relation to the objectives of the study, within this the subthemes were further discovered in the dataset of the gathered data.

Interpretation of Data

The data was evaluated to clarify the meaning and significance of the themes in relation to the research question and objectives after they have been identified and defined. This entailed the researchers investigating the relationships across themes, scrutinising discrepancies or inconsistencies in the data, and considering the wider study context (Braun & Clarke, 2012). When interpreting the data, the researchers applied literature control using various literature from and outside the literature review of the research to provide further justifications of the data gathered.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, ensuring the trustworthiness of data is crucial. To establish trustworthiness, the researcher observed the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data and findings as indicated by (Leavy, 2022). Utilizing the proper research techniques to further extract data, the study ensured credibility. The study's conclusions' durability over time and under different conditions is referred to as its reliability (Leavy, 2022). The researchers took note of every step of the research process, from the type of instrument used, how research will be conducted and how data will be extracted to make final conclusions so as to ensure reliability of the findings. Pertaining to confirmability the researchers kept all the collected data secured. The researchers ensured to keep all the collected data as proof that no data was manipulated and not altered in any way. Transferability is the extent to which research findings can be generalized or applied to other populations or situations (Leavy, 2022). The findings of the study helped the researchers understand the various challenges experienced by school social workers in the Johannesburg and gave holistic view of their experiences with regards to practicing in township schools.

Ethical Considerations

This is a set of guidelines that guide study designs and methodologies. The application of fundamental ethical principles to research, such as respect for people and society in the design and implementation of studies, is known as research ethics (Bordens & Abbott, 2018). In this study, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). This approval signifies that the research proposal was reviewed to ensure that it met ethical guidelines, including considerations of participant safety, informed consent, and confidentiality. The ethical reference number is SW24/05/05. Furthermore, the researchers observed all the related ethical consideration in the study before, during, and after the study. Permission to conduct the study as received from management at the YOSA and from a school principal at one of the schools that participated in the study in an expert view of the study. One essential element of research ethics is informed consent. Its goal is to allow those being studied to freely (willingly) participate in research after they have given their consent and been fully informed of the potential repercussions before any study begins (Bordens & Abbott, 2018). This was accomplished by giving participants clear and intelligible

information about the research's objectives, any risks and rewards, their rights as study participants, and any policies regarding data storage and confidentiality (Leavy, 2022).

Concept of confidentiality in the study: The researchers first ensured that meetings with the participants were taken in secured spaces, the researcher also ensured the participants that the data collected will be kept within the reach of just the research and the researchers.

In addition, the researchers made it certain that participants received respect and there was no harm during the data collection and in line with ethical considerations researchers did not manipulate any collected data during the research process and recorded all collected data from the study's participants and ensured that proper sources were acknowledged.

Limitations

A study's limitations are issues and events that come up that are beyond the researcher's control. They frequently restrict the scope of a study and can have an impact on the outcome and inferences that can be made. No matter how closely protocol is adhered to, every study has its limits (Bordens & Abbott, 2018). The validity and reliability of a qualitative study are linked to its limits because these investigations take place in natural settings and are challenging to reproduce (Leavy, 2022). The limitations of this study were:

- Because there were only six individuals in the study, the results might not be broadly applicable. The complete range of experiences among school social workers across different demographic groups and geographical areas in the province or the nation may not be fully represented by this tiny sample.
- The results may not accurately represent the difficulties and resources accessible to school social workers in other areas or races with distinct social, economic, and cultural settings because the study was carried out in a particular region with a preponderance of African residents.
- Self-reported experiences from individuals were used in the study, which may have introduced bias. Based on their recent experiences or impressions, participants might have highlighted difficulties, which could have impacted the data's neutrality.

RESULTS

Table 1 Demographic information of participants (N=6)

Demographic Factor	Variable	Number
Age	18-29	4
	39 +	2
Gender	Female	5
	Male	1
Years of experience	1-5	3
	5-10	1
	10-15	
	15-20	1
	20-25	
	25-30	1
Race	African	6
	White	
	Coloured	
	Indian	
	other	

Table 1 above represents the demographic data of the participants that were part of the study. The study was conducted in an area that has predominantly African people. The study depicts the race, the age, the gender and the years of experience of the participants of the study and as can be seen from table 1 a majority of participants (N=5) in line with the profile of registered social workers in South Africa where a majority are females.

Table 2 Themes and Subthemes of the study

Themes	Subthemes
1. Challenges that school social workers face when implementing welfare programmes	• Lack of resources • High workload • Fragmentation in the school system. • Lack of clarity of social work roles.
2. Accessibility of support services and resources for school social workers.	• Community leadership • District office • Limited access to support
3. Insights on addressing given challenges of school social workers	• Financing • Collaboration • Supervision and support • Institutionalising social work in department of education

Theme 1: Challenges that school social workers face when implementing welfare programmes

This theme covered common challenges that are usually faced by school social workers, the subthemes that have emerged are the lack of resources, high workload, fragmentation in the school system and lack of clarity on social worker roles. In the study the first subtheme on a lack of resources emerged as one of the biggest challenges, and school social workers highlighted challenges in obtaining the required resources to implement social welfare initiations.

“Umm. A lack of resources would definitely be that, and just an overload of students having to see you as a social worker because there are no social workers that are many that are assigned in the school. So you get to have so many students. Coming to you alone because there is a lack of, you know, social work, visibility of, of social work, presence in the schools. So you get to maybe be the only one and now you get an overload of students, yeah.” {Participant 1}

The difficulty experienced by school social workers is frequently related to the fact that there are not enough social workers working in important settings for them to carry out social welfare programs. Most social workers in schools rely only on outsourcing necessary resources to carry out their social welfare programs because of things like budget constraints and social worker layoffs (Skhosana, 2020).

Secondly the school social workers highlighted the struggle they have with the caseloads, what was highlighted is the unequal ratio of social workers to learners in the school the often results in high caseloads.

“So with the limited or with the high caseload and just a few social workers, you'd find that sometimes you have to work in more than one school. And just one school in general, as a social worker. Is enough to just knock it down. It's not easy.” {Participant 4}

Studies have been conducted regarding the difficulties faced by school social workers. To improve the well-being of learners in schools, recommendations have been made to the various departments to attempt and enforce the deployment of more school social workers. The high case load is the overall impediment of their treatments (Sibise & Mathebula, 2023). In line with the ecological perspective as a chosen theoretical framework, high caseload would affect functionality of the education system, which could therefore make it more difficult to execute social work projects in schools (Sinai-Glazer & Krane, 2020).

What was further highlighted as a subtheme to the study is the fragmentation in the school system, the participants further highlighted the inability of the three major role players who are the learners, parents and teachers and their inability to work together as a system which further disrupts the efforts of school social workers towards effective social welfare programmes.

“I would say that the challenge that I have is also. Parental involvement, especially in locations. When you have to involve parents, especially when you work with minors, you have to involve family. And even when you do your assessments, you kind of engage the ecology of the learner. And when you do that, you know the parents are not really. Immediately when they hear you are a social worker, they just will become very defensive, even though you explain what your intentions are and you know parents are very hard to rope in” {Participant 2}

“The fragmentation in the school system. Where parents are disengaged from the education of their children. The educators you have no connection with parents. Feel obedient, parents. I mean obedient learners. Carry the message home if they are told to bring a parent which means there is no relationship between parents, Learners and educators.” {Participant 3}

According to research, most school social workers deal with students who are struggling academically, but the study also found that parental and teacher involvement in programs designed to support the student is not evident. which could lead to the school environment being even more fragmented (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020).

The other subtheme that emerged from the findings is the lack of clarity of the roles of a social worker in the school. A South African study by Van Sittert and Wilson (2018) had found that by working in a multidisciplinary team and applying a variety of theoretical models and skills, school social workers do make a contribution in schools within the context of inclusive education. Participants have highlighted a few encounters with individuals not having a full grasp on what the school social worker does in a school setting, which further results in confusion for all individuals involved in the school setting.

“People in the Township have a very misguided view on what social workers do. They believe that social workers are, you know, there to kind of help, especially with resources, you know, so you know when you need food, go to a social worker when you need clothes, go to a social worker and that is. Especially because our friend NGO, that is something that you know is kind of. Minor, you know. That's not what. We do so every time when families come or learners come and we say I have a challenge with food and you tell them that. Listen, sorry, you know, we help where we can. But obviously because of funding, no, it's not all the time that we can assist and that's how you kind of lose them.” {Participant 2}

"Social work is foreign in Township schools. Educators. Parents. Are not informed about the role of a social worker in a school setting. Hence, it's a whole process of educating educators about the role of a social worker, which makes. What is it? A systems approach very difficult in the beginning because it's like. The aliens coming in Union." {Participant 3}

Research on the underdevelopment of social work, particularly in school settings, was carried out in Australia. It was brought to light that school communities lack a clear awareness of the kinds of services provided in schools and the functions of social workers (Ioannou et al., 2023). This study supports the study's findings by pointing out that communities often lack awareness of the functions of social workers in educational settings, which leads to the inefficient implementation of social welfare programs in schools.

Although school social workers have highlighted some challenges regarding them operating within the bounds of the school setting. The expert had a differing opinion and sees them as a great asset for schools.

"They ground them because they are young, they are very, very young. And you remember grade eight grade 9, 10 they are just you know not so long ago from primary. So, they are used to these things, and they are used to being engaged with a number of things and then in high school. Unfortunately, there's nothing so those problems like I'm saying they help discipline them, they keep them. Easy because you know the energy that the little ones have, so they would if they there's nothing then they would use it in wrong things that that's why they would fall into drugs into drinking into banking and all of those. So what the social workers are coming with here is really, really helping the school and the community." {Expert}

Theme 2: Accessibility of support services and resources for school social workers

Within this theme the first subtheme to have emerged is the community leadership. What was noted is that school social workers especially those in NPOs and NGOs heavily rely on community leadership to be their gateway access to the community and schools.

"Well, the most important thing is. Interweaving with the community leadership. To partner with the Community leadership. And adopt more like a talk down approach." {Participant 3}

Working together with community leaders can help organisations that provide social welfare programs operate more successfully in local areas. Community leadership is frequently a gateway to communities. through negotiating and establishing trust with local leaders. For a variety of programs, community leaders frequently grant access to outside parties (Lansing et al., 2023). Through such initiatives, as highlighted by the participants, working together with communities has thus served as one of the biggest support networks towards social welfare initiatives that are being implemented.

What was further highlighted was the district office, the participants highlighted how some support networks for schools are the school districts who help with the process of placing school social workers in schools.

"Where is you go to the school. You walk through the district office; they give you authorization and they direct the schools to accommodate you. That way life is easier because then by mandate of the district. The schools are now forced. To treat you as a partner and work with you that way, I think yes." {Participant 3}

The other subtheme that emerged was the limited access to support, this subtheme emerged in as opposed to the availability of support networks for school social workers. What participants highlighted is the shortage of required specialists in school to help combat challenges in school settings.

"There are definitely restrictions. So not only with that, but also with resources where you know as much as you. The work that you're doing is for the school. You know you're producing stats for the school. You're you're helping learn. And the school doesn't really assist when it comes to things like paper. You know, they don't know the space. It's very difficult. You always have to ask for just the free room to use. So yes, as much as our services are offered, but there's always a restriction where the school also, you know, yeah," {Participant 2}

"I feel like yes they are both restrictions and the lack of support when it comes to the assistance provided to school social workers in townships because I feel like there's a limited access to specialised services. You know there's often a short a shortage of specialised services like psychologists or speech therapists so the social workers may struggle to get the learners referred to the appropriate services. to maybe long waiting list or a lack of available professionals." {Participant 4}

"Yes, it's definitely limited funding. And like I've mentioned. Above I mean before so. Sometimes you're not even able to implement some programs that you want to that you would have been able to implement if you had. The necessary resources or the necessary funding, so it's not easy for you to. Implement Programs without enough funding, so that's a lack of funding. And the high number of the caseloads I think. Yeah. And also we don't have enough trained social

workers as well, so working alone. Or with probably you'd find that it's. Like 2 of you. Within that, within the surrounding areas and you have to work with like a number of schools" {Participant 5}

The government's lack of efforts to ensure that experts are hired and placed in schools is one of the reasons contributing to school social workers' limited access to support networks (Skhosana, 2020). The next factor is the low level of participation in interventions across all significant and pertinent educational systems, including teachers and learners (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020).

The expert in this section highlighted that schools in some cases try to offer support to school social workers, in a way of easing some of their duties through collaboration between some teachers and school social workers.

"I'm not sure. But I would say the communication and the relationship we have between ourselves as a staff and yourselves as social workers, that's one tool that would make things easier because it's easy. You are able to access the learners. Is because when you come to an educator to say you refer this particular child, where do I locate the child or maybe even extended information that we might need around the child? What we know how the child is performing in. You know that relationship it assists because we don't just dump you with the kids. So having that, you know, discussion about that openness between amongst ourselves, it assists a lot to facilitate to make it easier on you and also the feedback that would sometimes get from yourself. Even because we know that whatever you're handling with then it has to be confidential" {Expert}

Theme 3: Insights on addressing given challenges

The emerged subtheme on this theme is the financing regarding social work services for schools. Participants made suggestions on what measures may be taken to overall assist school social workers in their process of implementation social welfare initiatives in schools.

"The number of social workers who are unemployed and the yet the number of vacancies that are within even the Department of Social Development and. I'm thinking the cry would be of financial resources, but otherwise. If government get the resources. I don't see any problem because we have so many social workers that are unemployed that can fill in those positions within the schools." {Participant 3}

The other highlighted factor was the collaboration between the involved systems regarding school social work. Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration between schools, parents, and the department of social development.

"Just reforms around or even programs, not by the department of, you know, maybe social developments that kind of emphasizes the importance of. School social workers in the school and actually make the social workers and the teachers and the school, they realize that social workers are an important part. Of the school." {Participant 2}

Another factor that emerged was the supervision and support, which participants highlighted the importance of ongoing support from social work managers and supervisors in cases proving support for social workers who are school based.

"So the support for school social workers would be. Offered most importance, like where they get to also just. Have a session of their own, almost like a support group of a focused group of their own where they just share their experiences and they support each other in their journey. I think there is a lack of that when it comes to school social workers, yeah" {Participant 1}

In the social work profession, supervision is a very important part of all the different service areas. It guarantees that supervisees acquire advanced knowledge to use their talents and competencies to client demographics in a competent and morally sound manner. One of the many roles that supervision has been shown to play is that of a support system for professionals (Wong et al., 2024). The support function seeks to lessen the stress that social workers experience at work to improve their performance and success. Under this kind of supervision, employees can grow both professionally and personally in a secure, safe, and supportive work environment (Monica, 2022).

The other highlighted subtheme was the institutionalisation of school social work services. Participants highlighted the importance of ensuring that the significance of school social workers in all schools is made a priority and rather made mandatory. In line with the chosen theoretical framework, school social workers' work in schools is influenced by larger social structures and policies. When school social workers in townships frequently provide their services to underfunded schools (Khumalo and Pretorius, 2024; Skhosana, 2020), these problems frequently make it difficult for school social workers to conduct social welfare programs in schools, affecting the exo-system and macrosystems necessary for fulfilling service interventions. Henceforth participants called for each school to have social workers permanently placed.

"So I was saying the department should recognise the inherent challenges, first by families and learners who go to school, and that an acknowledgement is required to the effect that. Education is not. Numbers game way learners have just to go into class, seat the teacher comes and teach learners are not depositories, they are social beings whose social

conditions matter. If they have to function effectively in the learning environment. So what it means is, given that these learners have so many challenges, the department should institutionalise social work services within schools because of the inherent disadvantage inherent. Challenging conditions that learners are coming from, especially in Township schools.” {Participant 3}

“my wish I'm giving you this background so that to say my wish is when you finish, I would wish that the department would work with you so that you would be. Stationed based in the schools so that or even if it's not on site, maybe for whatever reason wherever but the department should refer if there are any cases referred to the clinics or wherever about the learners, they must you must handle them because you now” {Expert}

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The complicated context that school social workers work in is highlighted in the above discussion of results. The research highlights urgent issues that make it difficult for social workers to provide effective student services, including a lack of resources, heavy caseloads, and small support systems. By removing these obstacles, schools can improve the beneficial effects of social work on students' academic performance and well-being through more financing, institutionalization of the job, and improved community collaborations. Based on the findings above, township-based school social workers face numerous obstacles when attempting to carry out social welfare programs. The study tackled the problem of the lack of resources, high workload, the lack of clarity in the roles of a social worker in the school setting, and fragmentation, which was a relatively novel idea. It is evident that the success rate of social welfare programs carried out by school social workers is significantly impacted by the absence of participation from all pertinent role players, including the school, parents, and students (Skhosana, 2020).

When evaluating the support systems that school social workers in the Soweto community have access to. It emerged that there are a few resources that could be helpful. It was brought to light that school social workers frequently depend on the district office and local councils, among other community leaders, for assistance. The success of most initiatives is further hampered by the lack of access to support, particularly when it comes to having adequate experts who handle complicated problems, like educational psychologists in the school context (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020).

The appropriate funding of social work services, particularly in schools, including hiring more social workers and stationing them in schools, was emphasised in the study to solve the difficulties faced by school social workers. The study also emphasised the significance of collaboration and partnership among the key stakeholders, which include the Department of Social Development, parents, and schools. Additionally, the value of supervision was emphasised, along with how it has aided some social workers' professional development and how institutionalising social work in schools can be advantageous (Monica, 2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- The DBE Ought to consider the significance of having a minimum of two social workers assigned to each school on a permanent basis, working in tandem with additional experts for other complicated cases.
- The Department of Social Development to guarantee the hiring of additional social workers and their continued deployment to schools to carry out social welfare programs, and make available additional funding for NGOs and NPOs that serve school environments. It is crucial that the department take the lead in ensuring that social workers and the roles they play in carrying out welfare projects in schools are acknowledged, even though the profession is still seen with an unfavourable perspective. In addition, DSD working collaboratively with other government stakeholders and Non-Profit Organisations should hold community seminars aimed at educating the public about school social workers and the services they provide. Community leaders' involvement will help to support social workers and encourage community members to work together with school social workers to implement social welfare programs. It will also help to combat fragmentation issues that hinder the success of these programs.
- This article was based on research from a single case of NPO social work services and therefore large-scale research should be done to see if school social workers across the country face comparable difficulties when implementing social welfare programs. More answers to the problems they face and the policy structures they encounter might be found if school social workers are included on a bigger scale.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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