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# Exploring the Psychosocial Challenges of Adolescent Learners: Opportunities for School-Based Psychosocial Support in Public Schools

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***Abstract*:** Adolescent learners around the world face a range of psychosocial challenges, which can negatively impact their well-being and academic success. In many low–middle income countries (LMICs), the lack of psychosocial support (PSS) structures in schools can exacerbate these challenges. This study explores psychosocial challenges reported by adolescent learners in grades 10–12 and the perceived support they require at school. Using a qualitative multiple-case study design, twenty-two purposively recruited adolescents aged 15–19 years from two public schools in Johannesburg, South Africa, participated in open-ended surveys. Thematic analysis revealed that the challenges faced by adolescent learners include being negatively treated by teachers, bullying from peers, decreased self-esteem and self-confidence, daily commuting difficulties, and insufficient material resources. Participants identified a need for PSS services at public schools, for the provision of mental health services (i.e., counseling and therapy) and the establishment of peer support groups to support adolescents with their developmental challenges. The initiation of community charity/funding drives for learning materials and school uniforms, that involved the learner community, was also identified as a role that PSS services could fill. This study recommends the deployment of school social workers and school psychologists to public schools in LMICs to help address the developmental challenges faced by adolescents and improve their academic performance and overall psychosocial well-being. In-service training programs for teachers may be developed by these professionals to assist them in better caring for and supporting adolescents.

***Keywords*:** *Adolescent Development, Learners, Psychosocial Well-being, Low–Middle Income Countries, School-Based Psychosocial Support, Well-being*

## Introduction

Adolescents in South Africa are confronted with a range of developmental challenges that can profoundly affect their psychosocial functioning. These challenges have become an urgent matter, supported by a growing body of evidence indicating the profound and long-lasting effects on adolescents' academic performance and general well-being (AlBuhairan et al. 2017; Spaull 2013). In the context of low–middle income countries (LMICs), these challenges are compounded by poverty and a lack of resources in the school setting, which negatively affects learners' well-being and results in a lower quality of teaching and learning (Setlhare, Wood, and Meyer 2016). Literature shows that the adolescents' psychosocial developmental challenges relevant to the LMICs include school violence (Hendricks and Tanga 2019; Pretorius 2020), mental health issues (Copeland et al. 2014; Nzeadibe, Igboeli, and Ajaero 2018), and academic-related difficulties (Akcoltekin 2015). Setlhare, Wood, and Meyer (2016) state that although South African teachers have received some basic concepts



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of educational psychology, counseling, and community development, they are not fully equipped to provide comprehensive psychosocial support (PSS) to adolescents who experience these challenges.

While this suggests a need for additional PSS services within South African school settings, mental health services are not currently prioritized in the country. Many South African adolescents struggling with mental health difficulties and those at risk fall through the cracks as they receive no or very limited support (Simelane, Nassenii, and de Vriesi 2022). In some instance, adolescents in LMICs are not keen on taking up the mental health services provided at primary health care due to societal stigma surrounding mental health issues, which discourage them from seeking help (Mascayano et al. 2020; Sorsdahl et al. 2021). Moreover, within our context, limited mental health knowledge and a high prevalence of perceived stigma against mental health care service users among caregivers and service users impede treatment-seeking (Monnapula-Mazabane and Petersen 2021). Through the voices of adolescent learners in two South African public schools, the current study explored the psychosocial challenges faced by adolescents and the perceived support that they require at the school level.

## Literature Review

The ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1992) is a widely used framework in health promotion studies that offers a comprehensive understanding of the interrelated factors influencing children's health and well-being. It posits that various factors at different levels of society impact an individual's psychosocial health outcomes. The theory recognizes that children are both influenced by and have an impact on their immediate environment, the microsystem that includes their family, peer groups, and their neighborhood. It also considers the interactions and relationships (mesosystem) between these microsystems, such as the relationship between children and their teachers, school, peers, and home environment. Additionally, the framework considers the influence of the external environment, known as the exosystem, which indirectly impacts a child's development. This includes factors like the parents' workplace or financial difficulties. The broader societal and cultural contexts, referred to as the macrosystem, also play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' experiences, containing both barriers and supports toward healthy development. This includes socioeconomic conditions and the policies and practices of the school system. Ecological systems theory has been shown to be an effective lens through which to explore the psychosocial experiences of adolescents in varied settings, with a variety of foci, such as teenage pregnancy (Crawford 2020; Mutahi et al. 2022).

To specifically explore the psychosocial challenges of adolescent learners at school, the study is located within the microsystem and the mesosystems, therefore, looking at the adolescent's immediate environment (peers, family, and school) and the interrelationship between these different environmental components. This theory is relevant as underpinning this study because it argues for a comprehensive understanding of the psychosocial challenges



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faced by children and identifies the support structures needed to address these challenges at various levels of society. In the context of this study, ecological systems theory considers the different factors that influence adolescents' well-being and can inform the development of effective interventions and policies that promote positive health outcomes.

Adolescence represents a critical developmental phase marked by significant changes in various domains, including biological, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional aspects (Bonnie et al. 2019). This period of transition, starting with the onset of puberty and extending into the mid-20s, encompasses three distinct stages: early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence (World Health Organization 2021). Over these stages, children experience profound internal and external transformations, shaping their identities and influencing their future trajectories. Biologically, rapid brain development and the advent of puberty lead to physical changes such as sexual maturation, fluctuations in hormones, and growth spurts (Bonnie et al. 2019; Murdoch Children's Research Institute 2013). Cognitively, there is notable progress in problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking abilities (Bonnie et al. 2019). Emotionally, there is heightened emotional intensity and the acquisition of skills related to emotional regulation, enabling the management of emotions, stress, and an increased vulnerability to factors like challenges, poverty, abuse, and violence (World Health Organization 2021).

This current study focused on the psychosocial development of adolescents in the middle and late adolescence stages (aged 14–19 years). Psychosocial development refers to the influences and interrelations between the psychology of a person and social factors and behaviors (Guyon, Falissard, and Kop 2017). Erikson (1968) argues that psychosocial development highlights the importance of identity formation during adolescence as adolescents search for a sense of self and personal identity through an intense exploration of personal values, beliefs, and goals and is significant for developing a sense of direction in life. The adolescents experience significant changes in their relationships with peers and adults, with the influence of peers becoming particularly important during these stages (Bonnie et al. 2019). Psychosocial challenges arise when adolescents struggle to mitigate their experiences between psychological, social, and behavioral factors (Erikson 1968). Heerde and Hemphill (2018) explain that adolescents' life experiences related to adverse life events, exposure to violence and family conflicts, changes in peer relationships and family patterns, and the emergence of mental health difficulties are significant factors in the psychosocial development of adolescents. These factors may result in multiple challenges that include but are not limited to self-image issues, academic difficulties, substance abuse, bullying, depression, and anxiety (Copeland et al. 2014; Pretorius 2020). Adolescents spend a significant amount of time in school attending classes, participating in extracurricular activities, completing schoolwork, and engaging with their peers (Bista et al. 2016). As such, schools as learning institutions play a crucial role in their development and contribute to both the educational and socialization processes that are essential for the personality development of adolescents.

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The South African education system is managed by the Department of Basic Education, a governmental organ that oversees all schools from grade 0/R to grade 12. Spaull (2013) reported that there are two different types of public school systems in South Africa: a smaller, high-performing segment for wealthier learners and a larger, underperforming one for the majority. The difference between these systems lies in the geographical location of the schools, the language spoken or the language of instruction, and the socioeconomic standing of the school (Spaull 2013). This current study is located within the larger public education system and contextual issues noted in it include budgetary concerns, yearly low exam results, absenteeism, lack of discipline, high rates of violence in schools located in lower socioeconomic standing communities, teaching quality, and overcrowded classrooms with unfair teacher–learner ratios and high dropout rates (Maddock and Maroun 2018; Pretorius 2020).

South African adolescents make up 17.4 percent of the national population and contribute to 2.1 percent of the total mortality (Statistics South Africa 2022). Within this population of adolescent, 20 percent have been found to have a detected or untreated mental health disorders, while 24 percent has been found to have experienced feelings of depression, hopelessness, and sadness, and 21 percent had attempted suicide at least once (Nzeadibe, Igboeli, and Ajaero 2018; Statistics South Africa 2022). Other key risk behaviors among adolescents include eating disorders, substance abuse, violence and traffic safety, physical activity and hygiene-related behaviors, and intentional and unintentional injuries (AlBuhairan et al. 2017; Statistics South Africa 2022). These issues can be further exacerbated by the academic and social pressures of school (AlBuhairan et al. 2017). The adolescents also experience difficulties with the transition from elementary to middle school or middle to high school and adulthood, which can be challenging for some adolescents to navigate, therefore, resulting in mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Simelane, Nassenii, and de Vriesi 2022). Additionally, South African schools are facing increasing concerns about violence, including bullying, harassment, and vandalism, which negatively impact adolescents' ability to achieve education goals and positive psychosocial development (Pretorius 2020). Bullying and mental health challenges are directly linked as adolescents who are exposed to bullying often experience emotional and cognitive impairments, low self-esteem and self-confidence, and self-harm and suicide (AlBuhairan et al. 2017; Hendricks and Tanga 2019).

Psychosocial development challenges faced by adolescent learners are complex and multifaceted, and they require a holistic and comprehensive approach to address them. Therefore, PSS for adolescents is a critical part of this holistic approach (Bennouna et al. 2019). This form of support is defined as a range of services and interventions designed to promote mental and emotional well-being, positive relationships, and a sense of belonging for adolescents (Christensen 2008; Mattingly 2017). Studies have shown that adolescents who receive PSS are better able to learn, build positive relationships, and attain age-appropriate developmental tasks (Mwoma and Pillay 2015; Ntinda et al. 2014). Adolescents are also more likely to develop positive self-esteem, increased resilience, and improved communication

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skills (Mattingly 2017). PSS can be provided by different stakeholders which may include school social workers, healthcare workers, community organizations, and schoolteachers (Calear and Christensen 2010; Pretorius 2020). These different stakeholders are key to promoting a positive school environment and addressing the developmental challenges faced by adolescents, consequently contributing to effective teaching and learning that would enhance learners' academic performances and psychosocial well-being (Bojuwoye et al. 2014).

## Methods

Utilizing an exploratory qualitative research design, the main aim of the study was to explore the psychosocial challenges experienced by grade 10–12 learners and the perceived support they require at school. A paper survey was utilized and distributed to all grade 10–12 learners at two public Johannesburg schools.

### Context of the Study

The study was conducted in two public secondary schools located in Johannesburg South, District 11, South Africa. The schools were selected based on their categorization as public secondary schools and because the author had an already-established relationship with the schools. District 11 schools are located in peri-urban communities, on the southern outskirts of Johannesburg, which is known as the financial capital of South Africa and the largest city in the Gauteng Province. The surrounding communities are made up of both structured residences and poorer, informal settlements, such as squatter camps and shack housing.

### Sampling Strategy

The purposive sampling was used to recruit adolescent learners who met the following criteria: (i) in grade 10/11/12, (ii) had attended the selected school since grade 8, (iii) able to read questions and write responses in the English language or the local languages of isiZulu or Southern Sotho, and (iv) have access to a smartphone device. Only adolescent learners who gave assent to the researcher to participate, and whose parents gave consent for them to participate, participated in the study (n = 22; n = 8 male; n = 14 female). Respectively, the participants were in grade 10 (n = 4), grade 11 (n = 8), and grade 12 (n = 10); aged 15–16 years (n = 5), 16–17 years (n = 13), 17–18 years (n = 3), 19 years (3), and unstated (n = 1); all Black Africans.

### Data Collection Procedures

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Witwatersrand HREC Non-Medical Committee (H20/06/16). Then permission was sought from the Gauteng Province's Department of Education and the principals of the two selected schools. The research kit consisted of the consent form, assent form, participants' information sheet, open-ended survey structured as a written interview, and the instruction note. To preserve the confidentiality of the survey responses, the instruction note indicated that the learners should send picture

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screenshots of their survey responses, together with the consent/assent forms to the author via WhatsApp or SMS. In addition to some basic demographic questions, two open-ended questions were asked: (1) What are the psychosocial challenges you currently experience? and (2) If you were the management of this school, what supportive measures would you implement at the school level to support learners? The use of open-ended questions allowed the learner participants to openly and freely respond to the questions asked (Albudaiwi 2017).

The research instrument and data collection process were pretested first (Hilton 2017) with one learner per selected school. This process revealed that the questions were appropriate, and the learners understood and followed the instructions as detailed in the research instruction note. The process also revealed that it was important to provide the participants with internet use data or airtime for them to send the screenshots via WhatsApp or SMS. Therefore, additional information was added to the instruction note indicating that participants needing network use data to send the screenshots to the author should send a please call me (i.e., no-cost network service that enables cell phone users to send a text message to another cell phone user, requesting them to make a phone call) to the author and the author then bought them R20 worth of data.

### Data Analysis

This study used inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2023). In the initial step, the open-ended survey responses, presented in the form of written interview transcripts, were meticulously transcribed and compiled into a unified spreadsheet, ensuring that the data remained organized and easily accessible for subsequent analysis. The initial codes were generated on a question-by-question basis whereby the author compared responses across participants, therefore, allowing the identification of initial patterns, emerging ideas, and potential themes (Watermeyer, Kater, and Khumalo 2022). The themes were reviewed and defined to align with the data and the current research aim. The author then named and defined the identified common themes across the data. Analysis of the themes against the current literature then allowed for further analysis concerning areas of convergence and divergence with existing understandings of adolescents' psychosocial challenges and their views on PSS. The study ensured rigor by providing comprehensive contextual information and incorporating verbatim responses from participants. Furthermore, an accurate account of the methodology processes has been presented, enhancing replicability and inviting critical examination of the research outcomes.

## Results

It emerged from the data analysis that adolescents at the two selected schools were faced with psychosocial challenges that affected their development in the school setting and that various school-based PSS services were needed to support them. Consequently, two themes and subthemes emerged (Figure 1), and they are detailed hereafter.



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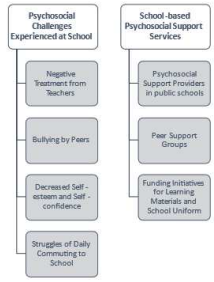



Figure 1: Themes and Subthemes

## Psychosocial Challenges Experienced at Schools

### *Negative Treatment from Teachers*

The participants expressed that they experienced negative treatment from their teachers. These experiences are noted in the adolescents' responses: "I was bullied by two teachers through the comments that they made [and] I have been struggling to study because of this" (A 18) and "some teachers bad mouthing us and name shaming us as learners" (A 2). The negative treatment was experienced through the teachers bad-mouthing the adolescents and name-shaming them. Another adolescent described their experience of this treatment as the teacher being dishonest and humiliating them, therefore, leading to them feeling hurt and scared to seek support from the teachers:

> Having to just face teachers that don't have honesty and having to deal with how they talk to you. And you have to pretend that you are good while you know it's hurting. When you don't understand something, you [are] scared to ask because teachers tend you turn you into a joke then they say they are helping you out and showing you where you went wrong.

### *Bullying by Peers*

Other participants reflected on the bullying experiences that they directly and indirectly encountered with their peers. In their experiences, they were bullied because of their close relationship with their teachers and also bullied for financial reasons and lunch meals: "Some of the kids at school, call me a teacher's pet because a lot of teachers are friendly with me, and they know that I am a person who is committed to her schoolwork" (A 15) and "other learners [bully] each other for the sake of money or lunch boxes" (A 11)

### *Decrease in Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence*

The participants reported a decline in their self-esteem and self-confidence due to the unfavorable treatment they received from teachers and due to low academic grades. They reported that there were instances where they were told that they were not capable and received reviews from teachers that affected how they perceived themselves and their abilities.

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This is evident in what the following adolescents said: "I have a low self-esteem and I was pushed down by being told that I am not capable" (A 18) and "Not getting the grades that I want to get because I sometimes doubt myself and sometimes the reviews we get from teachers get you down as a person" (A 20).

### *Struggles with Daily Commuting*

Daily commuting to school for some adolescents was reported to be another psychosocial challenge that they experienced, specifically because this resulted in them not arriving at school in a timely and efficient manner. Adolescent 1 reported on this by stating: "I really walk a long distance to get to school. I don't always have money for taxi fare so it's really bugging me. I can't carry all my books because of this [and] because they're heavy." Adolescent 4 reported that "[the challenge is] late coming because I live far from school." Although the adolescents did not elaborate further on this challenge, the struggles of daily commuting to school may be attributed to factors such as the family's choice of school (e.g., schools considered good schools with resources and have good pass rates) or socioeconomic considerations (e.g., no schools nearby, fee-paying schools).

## School-based Psychosocial Support (PSS) Services

### *PSS Providers in Public Schools*

Considering the already highlighted psychosocial challenges experienced by adolescents in the two public schools, the participants further emphasized the notable absence of PSS services in their schools. They strongly recommended the presence of PSS providers in their public schools to address these challenges and support those learners in need, as illustrated in the following responses: "I would invite social workers for those learners who are emotionally and mentally abused at their homes and advice learners to talk if they are experiencing any problems at home or at school" (A 8); "because I know children or teenagers have problems in their personal lives and even in their academic lives, I would consider bringing a school psychologist or therapists to allow learners to at least have someone to speak to and somehow distress" (A 9) and "have maybe a school psychologist so the learners can feel free to talk to them when they experience issues" (A 13).

In addition to recognizing the need for PSS providers in their public schools, some adolescents provided specific details about the services and roles that these professionals could offer. For example, one adolescent emphasized the importance of personalized counseling sessions, which would flag learners who are struggling as a result of their home circumstances and the need for family intervention: "I would make sure I get all my school learners some one-on-one counseling, so I get to know who are (learners) coming from broken homes and meet their parents" (A 2). Another adolescent suggested that schools could benefit from having specialized support from a therapist who would visit on a designated day to support and address ongoing mental health problems experienced by adolescents: "get a therapist who will come on Fridays to help learners who are traumatized and need help" (A 5).

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### *Establishing Peer Support Groups for Adolescent Learners*

The participants' responses indicated that they recognized the importance of peer support groups as a valuable resource for learners to share their experiences and learn from one another as adolescents. The participants cited several benefits of such groups, including increased emotional support, a sense of community, and the opportunity to connect with others who are facing similar challenges. One adolescent stated, "[I] have a period where learners are able to express their challenges to one another and maybe if a learner sees that there are other learners struggling with the same issues as them, they'll feel more encouraged emotionally" (A 13). This participant highlighted the potential of peer support groups to foster a sense of companionship and support among learners who may feel isolated in their development struggles.

Another adolescent emphasized the importance of creating a safe and comfortable environment for learners to share their experiences, stating, "I would open a lot of groups [for talking] about a lot of challenges that learners face and make them feel comfortable to talk to anyone if they can't talk with their parents" (A 13). This participant recognized that some learners may not feel comfortable talking to their parents about their challenges and stresses but may benefit greatly from being able to connect with peers who can relate to their experiences.

In addition to peer support groups, another participant suggested the formation of a student/learner council as another means of providing peer support and addressing the challenges faced by adolescents. The adolescent explained that the council would offer learners the opportunity to talk to their peers or someone who is approachable and it would be a platform for the adolescents to express themselves and communicate with their peers in a structured environment: "I would organize a student council where learners are able to talk to their peers or someone who is approachable so that they are more vocal about how they feel, and they are more communicative about what is bothering them" (A 19).

### *Funding Initiatives for Learning Materials and School Uniform*

The participants recognized the need for academic resources to ensure that adolescents can attend school and complete their academic activities effectively. Many of the adolescents cited financial constraints as a significant barrier to the academic and overall development of adolescents and highlighted the importance of securing funding and resources to support their academic needs. One adolescent reported that "[I could] ask for funders who can fund the school with resources that will help students to do their schoolwork" (A 6), therefore, highlighting the need for necessary school resources which could include textbooks, computers, and other educational materials. Another adolescent suggested that fundraising events could be organized to provide learners with basic necessities, such as school uniforms and shoes. They stated that "every year, I would encourage former students from my school to donate school uniform for those in need. I would have fundraising events just to buy school shoes for learners because some of the parents cannot really afford to buy their

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children some school shoes" (A 12). This participant identified that the basic necessities can be a significant financial burden for some families and suggested that providing these items to learners in need could help remove barriers to academic success.

## Discussion

This article set out to explore the psychosocial challenges experienced by adolescent learners in grades 10–12 and the perceived PSS services that may be implemented at the school level to minimize the experienced developmental challenges. The article acknowledges the limitations of the study in using self-reported survey data, which limited the author's ability to probe in depth into the psychosocial experiences of adolescent learners. Additionally, the results of this study may not be generalized to the greater population of adolescents in the South African setting due to the small sample size. In light of these limitations, the study gathered data from different schools and is a representation of the participants across the different grades.

The findings of this study confirm the unfavorable treatment from teachers, bullying from peers, decreased self-esteem and self-confidence, and daily commuting difficulties as the psychosocial challenges faced by adolescents. In addition to these challenges, the study revealed a lack of PSS in public schools, highlighting the need for PSS services to support adolescents with their development. This suggests that schools, as part of the adolescent's microsystem, should create dynamic and supportive environments that would influence and interact with other microsystems in their lives. Therefore, contributing to their holistic development and well-being within the context of their larger ecological system.

Although the findings of the study may be considered generic to the global context, especially in LMICs, this study found that the adolescents in the selected public schools experienced negative treatment from teachers and bullying from their peers. In school environments, teachers are expected to be role models of good behavior for their learners and to provide safe and supportive learning environments, but this is not always the case as teachers are capable of mistreating or unfairly treating learners. The negative treatment experienced by the adolescents was found to be through teachers bad-mouthing and name-shaming them. Although the mistreatment of learners by teachers has been less explored in literature, the World Health Organization (2022) and Gusfre, Støen, and Fandrem (2022) confirm that learners are at risk of being mistreated or "bullied" by teachers, and this treatment is often evident through verbal humiliations and emotional ill-treatment.

Consequently, negative interactions and comments from teachers in the school environment can have harmful effects on adolescents' self-esteem, self-confidence, and academic performance, as demonstrated in this study. In fact, Mori et al. (2021) found that mistreatment and unfair treatment of learners by teachers were associated with learners feeling unsafe at school, which contributed to the psychosocial problems that they experienced. Additionally, peers were confirmed to be the perpetrators of bullying in the school environment in which bullying was done for financial gain, lunch meals, and jealousy over learners who have good relationships with their teachers. Studies by Masilo (2018) and

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Varela et al. (2020) which are focused on bullying in the school setting mirror these findings. These negative interactions of the participants with their teachers and peers indicate a dynamic interplay between themselves and their ecological environmental factors. Research by Boulton (2013) and Wu, Qi, and Zhen (2021) further explains that such interactions can lead to negative emotions, loneliness, helplessness, and a diminished sense of belonging, causing long-term difficulties for adolescents.

The findings of this study draw attention to the social issue of commuting difficulties that South African learners face, especially in LMICs (Joseph and Carpenter 2017). It is not shocking that the participants of this study found this to be a challenge as learners form part of the majority of commuters in South Africa (de Kadt et al. 2013). The commuting difficulties were attributed to the considerable distance between their homes and schools which Ngidi and Essack (2022) highlight as a problem needing to be addressed in South Africa. Adolescents are more vulnerable to this issue as they have been found to travel further to reach schools as compared to children in primary schools (Hall 2023). Additionally, commuting difficulties may be linked to the adolescents' lower socioeconomic standing (de Kadt et al. 2013) as this study found that the participants struggled with frequently having funds to afford transportation to school by taxi. Although this is not new evidence for an LMIC context, the consequences of financial constraints were the fact that the adolescents would cover a significant distance on foot from home to their schools, experienced distress, and their journey was more challenging due to the weight of their schoolbooks. Additionally, this impacted the participants' arrival on time at school and their academic performance (Maile and Olowoyo 2017). Another effect relating to commuting difficulties may be that children fall prey to the real and ever-present dangers of crime (González et al. 2020; Joseph and Carpenter 2017). The author of this study believes that although many schools have been built in the participants' surrounding communities, school placement is an issue as parents sometimes send their children to far schools because of a lack of space and school resources in closer schools and because of socioeconomic considerations and the academic status of the schools (Davison, Werder, and Lawson 2008). In response to this finding, the ecological theory suggests that intervention should be targeted at the school level where providing safe and reliable school transport for learners is a priority. Intervention may also be provided at the individual level where learners from low-socioeconomic standing families are provided with transport fare subsidies by the education department or schools in instances that the schools cannot afford to provide learners' transport services.

South Africa launched the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP) in 2012, which aimed to provide comprehensive school health and support services through collaboration between the Departments of Health, Basic Education, and Social Development. The goal of the ISHP was to enhance the well-being of children attending school and their local neighborhoods, taking inspiration from similar LMICs such as Botswana, Ghana, and Nigeria (Ramukumba, Rasesemola, and Matshoge 2019). However, Pillay, Patel, and Setlhare-Kajee (2023) note that South African public schools are still not adequately equipped to address the psychosocial

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challenges faced by the learners. Similarly, this study revealed that PPS services at the selected public schools were lacking and that it was imperative to establish such school-based services to facilitate adolescents' growth, development, and overall well-being (Mwoma and Pillay 2015). Interestingly, the participants advocated for the need to have PSS providers such as school social workers, school psychologists, and therapists who could offer personalized, ongoing, and specialized care to address these challenges. Contrary to research that found low utilization of mental healthcare support services by adolescents (Bantje et al. 2020), this study suggests that adolescents see the need and benefit of having such services. These providers are outlined in the ISHP as the multidisciplinary team responsible for rendering services to learners, when necessary (Ramukumba, Rasesemola, and Matshoge 2019). Previous studies by McKeague et al. (2018), Stallard et al. (2014), and Reyneke (2020) emphasize that PPS providers would be able to establish intervention and prevention programs to support adolescents at the individual level, therefore, fostering positive adolescent development experiences. The programs may include high-quality activities that would help the adolescents develop healthy identities and positive interactions with their immediate environment at the micro level. Literature is limited on the effectiveness of having such support professionals in schools in LMICs due to fragmented and uncoordinated implementation of the policy. However, evidence from high-income countries shows that schools with these professionals thrive in improving adolescents' psychosocial well-being and contribute positively to their development (Bennouna et al. 2019; Protivnak, Mechling, and Smrek 2016).

The participants were of the view that the PSS providers would provide mental health-related services such as counseling and therapy support to learners who come from homes with unfavorable conditions and those with traumatic experiences. They would also collaborate with the parents of these learners to ensure their well-being. These mental health services by PSS providers are suggested by previous research (Bojuwoye et al. 2014; Calear and Christensen 2010; Nkosi and Pretorius 2019). The provision of counseling and therapy would address experienced psychosocial challenges and promote the overall developmental well-being of adolescents within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Krause et al. 2021). The interactions and connections occurring between the adolescent's environment such as the school, home, and community may be explored to promote holistic support. Within the South African education system, PSS services are available to schools upon request by school management. The services form part of the specialist learning support provided by psychologists, school social workers, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, and audiologists. However, the challenge, as revealed in this study, is that schools may not be effectively making use of them as they were found to be lacking and have been highlighted to be a need. The author believes that this may be due to the school management in the selected schools not being aware of the services or processes in place for requesting specialist learning support, therefore limiting the support that the learners can receive.

The ecological systems theory posits that the context in which adolescents develop is a set of nested structures (Bronfenbrenner 1992). In this context, the participants viewed peer



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support groups and student councils (also referred to as Learner Representative Council [LRC]) as possible platforms that could be used to enhance and support adolescents' development. The findings suggest that these platforms would create supportive environments where adolescents can express their challenges with their like-minded peers. The establishment of such platforms has been found to positively impact adolescents' development and help-seeking behaviors, as they foster emotional and mental health support, a sense of community, and the opportunity for adolescents to learn from one another. Adolescents in peer support groups tend to have higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as better academic achievement (Zhao et al. 2021). Therefore, establishing support groups and the LRC can help adolescents recognize that they are part of an ecosystem and help them form healthy social relationships.

Murtin (2013) acknowledges the lack of educational resources in South African schools as most public schools remain disadvantaged, and they struggle with infrastructure backlogs, and low or no availability of learning resources such as textbooks, desks, and technological learning devices among others. Therefore, supporting the findings of this study that fundraising initiatives are essential to support learners' academic resources, including school uniforms, shoes, and other learning materials. Funding initiatives can be implemented in schools to supplement financial support received from the state, thereby ensuring a better quality of education for adolescent learners (Buys, du Plessis, and Mestry 2020). Although there is little evidence to support a direct connection between school uniforms and academic achievement, uniforms can promote a favorable school environment, which may have an impact on academic success. Uniforms support learners by encouraging identification, visual equality, minimizing distractions, and lowering absenteeism (Reidy 2021; Evans et al. 2008).

## Conclusion

This study delved into the psychosocial challenges faced by adolescents in grades 10–12 and offered valuable insight into potential school-based services needed to address these challenges. The study highlighted pervasive problems such as unfavorable treatment from teachers, peer bullying, reduced self-esteem, daily commuting difficulties, lack of learning material resources, and a lack of PPS services in public schools. These findings hold relevance not only for South Africa but also resonate with similar contexts, especially in LMICs. The interconnectedness of these challenges within the adolescents' ecological context was evident, underscoring the need for comprehensive school-based PPS services aimed at promoting their development and well-being. These services should include counseling and therapy services provided by school social workers, therapists, and school psychologists, establishing peer support groups and developing fundraising initiatives. By recognizing and implementing these PSS services, schools can better support adolescents in their holistic development and well-being.

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## Informed Consent

The author has obtained informed consent from all participants.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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