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ENHANCING CHILDREN'S SAFETY AND WELLBEING: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF A NEW SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMME IN FREE STATE TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

In response to the pervasive violence affecting children's psychosocial wellbeing in South Africa, the Adopt-a-School Foundation introduced the Thari programme, targeting behavioural challenges that manifest in gangs, substance abuse and classroom disruptions. This article presents findings from a pilot project in Botshabelo, Free State, where gangsterism, academic struggles and social issues prevailed. The main study used an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (qualitative/quantitative), but this article reports only on a part of the qualitative data from group and individual interviews that explored participants' perspectives. The study focused on children's behavioural challenges and observed school changes during implementation of the Thari programme. Results show a notable reduction in gangsterism and psychosocial issues, leading to decreased disruptive behaviour among children and highlighting improved behaviour after the introduction of psychosocial services.

Keywords: child and youth care worker; psychosocial services; school safety; school social work; vulnerable children

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As is well known, adverse childhood experiences, including instances of child abuse, neglect and traumatic encounters, are influential factors contributing to a range of behavioural issues in children. These behavioural challenges may manifest as difficulties with self-regulation, impulsive tendencies leading to harm to others, volatile behaviour, heightened levels of sadness or anger, self-harming tendencies, substance abuse and, in some cases, engagement in prostitution. As a result of these traumatic childhood events, affected children may exhibit behavioural problems

within the classroom setting (Mokwena & Setshego, 2021; Sciaraffa, Zeanah & Zeanah, 2018; West, Day, Somers & Baroni, 2014).

Behavioural issues in educational settings can of course affect academic achievement detrimentally, particularly when they culminate in school violence. Recognising the significance of safe learning environments, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) prioritised this aspect in its strategic plan for the period 2015-2020. The rationale behind this strategic focus lay in the contention that the promotion of violence-free schools is pivotal in fostering an environment conducive to effective and successful learning experiences for children (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2016). The fact that school safety is still a strategic focus in the 2020-2024 strategic plan is an indication that schools undoubtedly remain unsafe spaces (DBE, 2020). Considering that school violence includes threats of violence that can lead to psychological harm, physical assault, sexual violence, robbery, bullying and cyberbullying, it is indeed necessary to have programmes in schools that can make schools safer (Meyer & Chetty, 2017).

Schools need to ensure safe environments and, where possible, provide services that can support children. The policy on screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS) introduced school-based support teams (SBSTs) that were supposed to explore ways to support children so that barriers to their learning because of a lack of security or wellbeing could be addressed (DBE, 2014). Unfortunately, this seems insufficient to reduce the incidence of behavioural problems, since educators keep on complaining about unruly children and poor academic results (Ntshuntshe & Mathwasa, 2022). Behavioural problems stemming from adverse childhood experiences further contribute to behavioural and discipline problems in schools (Van Wyk, 2020).

A few suggestions for dealing with safety concerns in schools are provided by the DBE's National School Safety Framework (2015). Establishing secure and adaptable learning settings, early detection and intervention, reporting, and support and care are all covered within the framework. For this reason, it is crucial that programmes which emphasise the delivery of psychosocial services are available and adhere to the SIAS policy. The question remains: Should programmes be implemented in schools and, more specifically, whether programmes by social service professionals (social workers, child and youth care workers, etc.) could help to create safe schools and improve learner wellbeing?

The Thari programme was launched in South Africa as a pilot project by the Adopt-a-School Foundation, a subsidiary of the Cyril Ramaphosa Foundation in 2017, the year before he became the President of South Africa. The programme aimed to strengthen the school community by creating safe spaces free from violence and that were academically effective, inclusive and gender-sensitive as well as promoting health and wellbeing for all (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2019). The programme had three legs, which included providing psychological services to children, safe parks at schools and establishing a multi-sectoral forum to help access various services required by children (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2021a). Thus, this programme aligns with the DBE's

strategic plan (DBE, 2020) and may provide some answers on whether and how social services could help make schools safer and help improve the wellbeing of children.

The programme is situated in Botshabelo schools within an area classified as a township. Historically, townships were designated areas where individuals classified as black, coloured and Indian lived during the apartheid years. Despite subsequent development in these communities, they continue to grapple with elevated levels of poverty and unemployment (Donaldson, 2014; Statistics South Africa, 2021).

The significance of this programme lies in its provision of psychosocial services through school social workers and child and youth care workers (CYCWs) in mainstream township schools. It is noteworthy because these types of services are not commonly available in such schools. The reason for this is probably a lack of resources and/or because the DBE still does not fully recognise the contribution that social services could make to address learners' barriers to learning. In fact, the inclusion of social work services in schools is a relatively recent development, and only a few schools have the financial means to employ such professionals from their own resources. Currently, the DBE in the Free State primarily employs social workers in special education schools (Vergottini, 2019). As a result, the Thari programme stands out as a crucial initiative that addresses the gap in psychosocial support within South Africa's education system, particularly in underprivileged areas.

It has been established that South African children experience high levels of trauma, resulting in classroom behavioural problems. Although research has shown the link between adverse childhood experiences, behavioural problems and poor educational outcomes (Stewart-Tufescu *et al.*, 2022) there is a lack of empirical information on how these challenges can be attended to in the South African context, especially in schools where there are high levels of violence, gangsterism, alcohol and substance abuse, disorganised families, poverty, and children experiencing other forms of adverse experiences.

As there are no studies on the Thari programme, there was a clear need for research to assess and determine its impact on creating safe school environments. This article utilised qualitative data through an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (qualitative/quantitative) to examine participants' views on the programme (Creswell, 2014). Thematic analysis was applied to data collected from five semi-structured group interviews and three individual interviews, forming the basis of this article. It is important to note that this article does not delve into the quantitative data collected during the research project. Because of the comprehensive nature of the research, reporting on all the data gathered is not feasible. Consequently, several articles were generated and published in various journals.

The study's results revealed a noteworthy decline in gangsterism and psychosocial issues, leading to a substantial reduction in disruptive behaviour among children. Additionally, respondents reported that children feel significantly safer within the school environment, which fostered a positive transformation of the overall school culture. Notably, the provision of psychosocial

services emerged as a crucial factor contributing to the enhancement of children's behaviour and the overall school atmosphere.

Through the lens of developmental social work, this article aims to describe the behavioural problems educators experience in township schools and especially how the Thari programme contributed to changing the behaviour of children. The literature review consists of a discussion of the theory of change applicable to the Thari programme. After that, I explain the research methodology, results and conclusions. I end off with some recommendations for policy in South Africa and similar contexts.

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH AND THE THARI PROGRAMME

The developmental approach provides for various practitioners to provide social welfare services. This includes social workers and CYCWs (Department of Social Development [DSD], 2017). Each social-service professional has a specific task and they must work together to render services (DSD, 2013). In the case of the Thari programme, these two groupings worked together to provide psychosocial services to children in schools and at safe parks (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2019). Safe parks are spaces where children, especially at-risk children, can learn and play. These parks provides supportive caregiving that ensures the psychosocial wellbeing of children (UNICEF South Africa, 2017).

CYCWs were employed as part of the Thari programme to provide services within the context of four primary and four secondary schools located in Botshabelo, a township in the Free State, South Africa. Additionally, the CYCWs were tasked with the management of safe parks situated on the school premises. The selection of these schools for the project was based on their exposure to significant social challenges, encompassing high levels of violence, gang activity, alcohol and substance abuse, teenage pregnancies, disorganised family structures, instances of orphans and child-headed households, pervasive poverty, and children facing learning difficulties (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017).

It is worth noting that these social problems can be closely linked to adverse childhood experiences, which can have a detrimental impact on children's educational trajectories and contribute to adverse health outcomes in their adulthood (Forster, Gower, McMorris & Borowsky, 2020; Mason & Cox, 2014; Rutter, 2021).

The CYCWs underwent initial training within the framework of the Isibindi programme, which is a community-based initiative that aligns well with a developmental approach (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017). Upon children being directed to seek psychosocial support from the CYCWs, the latter would conduct home visits and carry out comprehensive assessments. Individualised development plans were then devised for each child and, when more specialised interventions such as counselling or statutory referrals (for example, for cases of sexual abuse) were deemed necessary, appropriate steps were taken. These included making referrals to social workers affiliated with the Department of Social Development, or alternatively accessing the support of

Thari social workers, who provided their services on a case-by-case basis during their visits to the programme (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2019).

CYCWs offer a community-based service, engaging with children and youths within the comfort of their homes and other domestic environments, thereby fostering connections and cultivating interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the CYCWs extend their assistance by helping with fundamental household chores, imparting knowledge on hygiene, health, nutrition, and other relevant subjects. Furthermore, the CYCWs take the responsibility of teaching the children and youths basic life skills, thereby contributing to the development of their resilience and coping abilities (National Association of Child Care Workers, 2014).

The Thari programme was oriented towards providing comprehensive and integrated services to both children and their families. These services were aligned with the integrated service delivery model established by the DSD, encompassing aspects of prevention, social protection, and therapeutic, rehabilitative and restorative interventions, as well as providing crucial social support (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2021a; DSD, 2006; 2011). It is noteworthy that the developmental approach tends to accentuate macro practice over therapeutic or remedial approaches (Patel & Hochfeld, 2013). However, the Thari programme, in contrast, employed a more holistic approach by incorporating micro, meso and macro practices to address the multifaceted needs of its beneficiaries (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2022).

According to Nortje (2022), certain theories align with and endorse the developmental approach. Among these theories are the ecological systems theory, the strengths perspective and the person-centred approach. Van Breda (2018) includes the resilience theory within this cluster of theories. Each of these theories has links with the developmental approach, which centres on a human-oriented philosophy, considering welfare as a fundamental human right, prioritising social problem prevention, promoting community awareness through education, advocating equitable resource distribution, and emphasising community engagement in intervention (Gray, 1996).

So when social service professionals apply the developmental approach, it can be defined as the

practical and appropriate application of social development knowledge, skills and values to social work processes to enhance the wellbeing of individuals, families, households, groups, organisations and communities in their social context. (Patel 2005:206).

The Thari programme's central objective revolved around enhancing the health and overall wellbeing of children in the eight schools by integrating key elements of the developmental approach. This entailed the implementation of processes that led to transformations in relationships and facilitated heightened access to essential resources. Moreover, it involved changing attitudes and structures within schools and other institutions. To achieve these objectives, services were provided at multiple levels, namely micro, meso and macro levels, thereby catering to individual, group and community needs. Furthermore, the interventions were geared towards nurturing the children's potential and fostering their overall development. Throughout the programme's

implementation, social service professionals remained steadfastly focused on adhering to the principles and philosophy of the developmental paradigm (DSD, 2013).

THEORY OF CHANGE

The programme followed a theory of change to guide its interventions. A theory of change (ToC) provides a framework to describe how a programme expects to achieve its desired outcomes. By using a ToC, the programme planned its goals and also determined the strategies needed to achieve the set outcomes (SOPACT, 2023). This theory explains how the programme intended to impact on its beneficiaries (Figure 1). In this ToC, the ultimate goal of the programme was to “strengthen the school community by creating a safe and empowering environment that is free from violence; academically effective; inclusive; gender-sensitive, and promote health and wellbeing for all”. The model that was followed to effect this goal was to “work at local level in collaboration with all stakeholders (forums and local NGOs) in order to ensure a harmonised approach” (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2021:8). The research partly reported in this article sought to analyse the model and determine whether it contributed to the abovementioned goal.

The ToC was built on assumptions which are, in essence, conditions that need to be in place to ensure that the theory works (NCVO Charities Evaluation Services, 2020). In other words, for the theory to work, Thari needed to ensure that the target school communities had access to psychosocial support services, that educators bought into the programme and referred children in need of support to the programme, that parents and caregivers were willing to participate in the interventions, that the community supported the schools to help ensure a safe environment, and that there were sufficient community interventions to increase the knowledge of the community to ensure behavioural change. The rest of the model was based on these conditions. If these conditions were not met, the ToC might be ineffective and the long-term goal would not be achieved. Considering these outcomes, it is clear that a developmental approach was used as the basis for the ToC.

Ultimate goal	Strengthen the school community by creating a safe and empowering environment that is free from violence; academically effective; inclusive; gender sensitive, and that promotes health and wellbeing for all				
Long-term outcome	Empowered school community with access to services	Safe school			
Intermediate outcome	Psychosocial wellbeing and resiliency in children	Child protection services accessible via schools			
Knowledge and change	Change in knowledge, attitude, practices and behaviour	Knowledge of child protection services	Functional forums and contracted NGOs		
Interventions	Psychosocial support	Community mapping of child protection services	Mobilise, advocate campaigns and workshops	Training of forums and NGOs	
Core activities	School participation	Safe environment	Capacity building	Establishment of forums	Identification of children in need
Project model	Work at local level in collaboration with all stakeholders (forums and local NGOs) to ensure a harmonised approach		Problem	High level of gangsterism among children and adults in community	
				High level of alcohol and substance abuse	
				High level of teenage pregnancies	
				Disorganised families and high prevalence of GBV	
				High number of orphans and child-headed families	
Programme assumptions					
1. The school community is able to access psychosocial support services					
2. Teachers will actively refer children who are in need of support					
3. Primary caregivers (parents) and children are willing and able to participate in full case intervention					
4. Community is able and willing to support the school in ensuring a safe environment					
5. Increased community knowledge leads to behavioural change					

Figure 1: Theory of change

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research problem guiding this study was directed at analysing the effectiveness of the Thari Women and Child Support Programme and exploring its implications for future service delivery in schools in Botshabelo and other educational institutions nationwide. The specific research question addressed in this article sought to ascertain the behavioural issues prevalent among children attending these schools and to evaluate whether the social services provided by the Thari programme contributed to positive changes in the participating schools.

The larger study employed an exploratory and descriptive approach to assess the efficiency of the Thari Programme. A mixed-methods design, specifically an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, was utilised. The first phase involved qualitative methods, including semi-structured group and individual interviews, to explore participants' perspectives (partially reported in this article). Subsequently, questionnaires were developed and administered in the follow-up phase (QUAL-quant) (Creswell, 2014). The chosen design was motivated by the lack of clarity about the programme's impact on its participants at the time. In this article data from the qualitative part of the study were used to answer the research question.

The study population consisted of educators from the eight participating schools, CYCWs, Thari and other staff directly or indirectly involved in the programme (for example, project managers, programme managers, social workers and forum members).

Non-probability purposeful sampling was employed, including the programme manager, a Thari social worker, a secondary school principal, three primary school principals, a representative from another primary school who represented a principal, eight primary and eight secondary school educators representing the SBSTs from different schools, nine CYCWs, and four members of the stakeholder forum (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). The inclusion criteria stipulated that all participants must have direct involvement with the services provided by the programme. This meant that the researcher's prior knowledge influenced the selection process (Mokofane & Shirindi, 2018).

The data collection involved three comprehensive face-to-face interviews and five semi-structured focus groups (33 participants) conducted in English. The researcher utilised semi-structured interview schedules for these sessions (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

Data analysis employed an illustrative approach to effectively present and interpret the collected data. For the qualitative data, quotes were meticulously edited to eliminate hesitations and ensure clarity without altering the underlying meaning of the information (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The qualitative data underwent analysis and interpretation by following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase process of thematic analysis. The analysis was facilitated using ATLAS.ti software to assist in this comprehensive process.

The quality constructs of Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied to ensure the study's trustworthiness, reliability and validity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The guiding concepts were

credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Bradshaw, Atkinson, and Doody 2017). The way that these concepts were applied and validated is explained in Table 1.

Table 1: Guiding concepts for trustworthiness, reliability and validity

Concepts	Application
Credibility	Engaging with participants and ensuring a trusting relationship Observing the participants Using multiple resources Performing member checks and giving feedback Providing a thick description of the phenomenon
Dependability	Describing the research design Documenting observations and changes made
Confirmability	Reflecting on possible factors contributing to bias Using quotes in context and reproducing enough text to ensure that the meaning is clear
Transferability	Purposefully selecting participants with programme experience Provide a full description of the study in a report so that it can be replicated to enrich the results

Ethical clearance was obtained from the General Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) of the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2021/0735/21) and the study was supported by the Free State Department of Basic Education.

Pseudonyms were used for all participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each participant selected their own pseudonyms, which were consistently utilised throughout both the focus group sessions and individual interviews. PS refers to primary school; SS refers to secondary schools; SBST refers to school-based support teams (SBST).

FINDINGS

This section unveils the research findings obtained from individual interviews and focus group discussions. The broader study yielded a total of five sections, encompassing 20 main themes and 80 sub-themes. Given the extensive nature of the study's findings, including all aspects within a single paper is not practicable. Hence, to ensure a comprehensive and in-depth discussion of the findings, they are reported across multiple papers.

This discussion will focus on one section, two themes and their corresponding subthemes, specifically related to the article's primary focus (Table 2). The initial theme delves into the contextual exploration of the challenges encountered by educators, while the second theme centres on the transformative outcomes attributed to intervention by the Thari programme.

Table 2: Prominent themes and sub-themes

Theme	Subthemes
Child behavioural problems experienced by participants	Volatile behaviour
	Gangs and substance abuse
	Bullying
	Class disruption and poor school attendance
	Adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues
Changes are seen in schools	Change in the school culture
	Creating a safe school
	Contributions the programme made to schools

Theme 1: Child behavioural problems experienced by participants

Subtheme: Volatile behaviour

The inception of the programme was partially prompted by a significant increase in violence and the evident impact of gangs on the schools under study. Hence, it is not surprising that the participants expressed apprehension about learner aggression. The findings suggest that some of this anger might be rooted in adverse family environments and experiences of abuse and neglect among the children.

All right, the problems that we encounter at our school is that the learners are always in a little bit of, what do you call it, angry, and then we have to deal with their anger and then when we make follow-ups, the anger comes from the homes because maybe their parents are separate, some of them they get drunk, and then they come to school without been prepared for coming to school, they are dirty, they wear dirty clothes, and they can't learn because they are angry, they are always angry. (Phangy – SBST PS)

Poverty was identified as an additional contributing factor to the occurrence of school violence. The prevalence of hunger among children often leads to conflict and altercations when food is distributed at feeding schemes.

We also have a problem of children that are very hungry, poverty is the serious problem; you see that when learners are going to get their food they are fighting for it, and it is not enough. So if they are not coming to school you can see that is a challenge because these kinds are the only source of food. (Mr Cool – SBST SS)

Educators encounter the challenge of dealing with angry children primarily stemming from their unfavourable home environments, which do not foster conditions that are conducive to learning. Moreover, poverty plays a significant role in contributing to aggressive behaviour among students.

Subtheme: Gangs and substance abuse

Addressing the issue of gangs has an inherent complexity, particularly when examining the underlying reasons for children's involvement in such groups. It appears that children hailing from disadvantaged or dysfunctional family backgrounds are more inclined to affiliate with gangs, where patterns of substance abuse prevail. The association with gang life and involvement in substance abuse significantly contributes to the prevalence of violence within educational institutions.

Well, in my school the biggest challenge is that a lot of our learners are coming from child-headed families; they are left to defend for themselves, parents are not around, some of their parents have died, some are living with their next of kin. We have a problem of substance and drug abuse. Substance and drug abuse go well with gangsterism, a lot of violence taking place in that area because of the gangsters, but this gangsterism it creates problems, but as for now they are subsided, they are not as serious as they were, the past four or five years. (Mr Cool – SBST SS)

The findings indicate that educators are faced with the responsibility of addressing the presence of angry children within their classrooms. The combination of gang activities, substance abuse and socio-economic deprivation exacerbates the issue of school violence.

Subtheme: Bullying

Educators have expressed their concerns about the issue of bullying within the school environment. Additionally, there appears to be a correlation between poverty and the perpetuation of bullying behaviour, as lunch boxes serve as one of the factors leading to children being targeted for bullying.

Bullying, it's a big problem. The older ones they're bullying the younger ones by taking their lunch boxes or asking them money. (Lucy – SBST SS)

Bullying extends beyond the act of taking belongings from others. According to Sarah, a CYCW, bullying also manifests in physical altercations and the use of offensive language within the classroom setting. However, during the discussions, the theme of other types of bullying behaviour was not explicitly addressed, resulting in ambiguity regarding additional forms of bullying that may be occurring.

They will bully each other [referring to fighting] and use vulgar language in class. (Sarah – CYCW)

The findings suggest that bullying represents a persistent issue affecting both primary and secondary schools. As noted, factors such as poverty, anger and gang influences could serve as contributing factors to the occurrence of bullying and school violence.

Subtheme: Class disruption and poor school attendance

It appears that children with learning difficulties often exhibit disruptive behaviours not only within the classroom but also they extend this disruptive conduct to activities outside the classroom, including on the playground.

... you will find some of the children who are disruptive and disrupting the whole school structure, they are the ones who are having learning difficulties. (Slow – CYCW)

In response to disruptive behaviour, children are referred to the CYCW to address the situation. This approach ensures that the disruptive learner receives psychosocial services, and it simultaneously safeguards the right to basic education for other children, preventing any infringement of their right to learn.

When there is something that is disrupting teaching and learning, we remove those learners and we take them to the Thari office, and then we continue with the teaching while the issues are being dealt with. (Girly SBST – SS)

School non-attendance among children emerged as a significant concern, particularly in primary schools. In response, CYCWs undertook home visits when children attended school irregularly. Through these visits, CYCWs engaged with parents, actively seeking ways to address the underlying reasons for non-attendance. As a result of the home visits and the provision of psychosocial services to schools, there was a notable increase in school attendance among the children.

Child counsellors do home visits where they will be able to meet with the parents. So, absenteeism has dropped and you know, absenteeism, it affects them. (Soviet – Principal PS)

The participants highlighted the positive impact of CYCWs on both class disruption and school attendance. Generally, educators lack the time to visit children's homes to investigate the reasons for disruptive behaviour or non-attendance, as they need to be present in the classroom to teach their subjects. However, in the participating schools, the CYCWs excelled in fulfilling this role. They not only played a crucial part in encouraging children to return to school, but also demonstrated adeptness in identifying underlying psychosocial problems and providing support to families in addressing these challenges. Their dedication and support proved instrumental in addressing class disruption and fostering improved school attendance.

Subtheme: Adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues

The participants raised concerns about teenage pregnancy in their schools. This issue was found to be a contributing factor to high drop-out rates among children. Additionally, it was reported that some children experienced pregnancies resulting from traumatic incidents of gang rape.

Teenage pregnancy leads to a high rate of drop-outs at our schools. This is one of the challenges. Some of the learners, after being pregnant, do not come back to school.
(Terror – SBST SS)

[Talking about teenage pregnancy] *Most of these learners that were gang raped, they end up not feeling confident enough to come again to school.* (Mary – SBST SS)

The health and wellbeing of children who engage in unprotected sex can be significantly impacted by sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Educators have confirmed an increase in the number of such cases among children. This underscores the importance of comprehensive sex education and access to sexual health services to address and prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections among young individuals.

Yes, the other thing that I want to add on in psychosocial factors is teenage pregnancy and the increase even of HIV and AIDS in our learners, we also have a problem with that. (Mary – SBST SS)

Indeed, another concerning theme reported was the prevalence of sexual abuse and harassment experienced by children. Due to the seriousness and sensitivity of these cases, CYCWs would appropriately refer such incidents to designated social workers, as they possess the expertise and training to handle these issues effectively. This collaborative approach aims to provide the necessary support and protection to the affected children and address the gravity of sexual abuse and harassment within the educational setting.

There was a case that was referred to the CYCW [subsequently referred it to the social worker]. It was a sexual abuse case. The client was over 18 but was still in high school. When I was talking to this learner, I realised that it seems like she is not mentally well. So, I had to try and find out what is really wrong with her. When I got to the home, her mother was there. I found out that the mother is also not mentally well. That completely tipped the case more, because we were trying to find out who the perpetrator was. (Peter – Thari social worker)

The findings highlight that schools grapple with the challenges of teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and sexual abuse. To address these issues, the programme ensures that social service professionals provide support and assistance to affected children. Given that gangs contribute to teenage pregnancy and drop-out rates, it becomes crucial for services to prioritise efforts to eradicate gangsterism both in schools and within the broader community. By targeting and addressing these

underlying factors, interventions can be more effective in promoting a safe environment conducive to learning for all children.

Theme 2: Changes are seen in schools

Subtheme: Changing the culture of the schools

Apart from Rita, it appears that there were no specific mentions from other participants regarding a change in the school's culture after implementation of the Thari Programme. However, Rita's observation, as an outsider, suggests that she noticed a positive change. She observed that both staff and children appeared happier compared to the time before the programme started. It is plausible that the improvements in the functioning of the school-based support teams (SBSTs) and the effective work of the CYCWs with the children could have contributed to this positive influence on the school's culture.

Moreover, another factor that might have positively impacted on the school's culture was the practice of educators sending children with behavioural problems to the CYCWs instead of dealing with these matters in the classroom, while teaching had to take place. This approach of referrals to the CYCWs could have improved the relationships between children and educators, ultimately fostering a more positive and constructive school culture.

It is something that I cannot really touch or I cannot really prove with any kind of statistic or whatever, but it is the feedback that you get when you go to school, to say somebody is saying, you know, when we think of Thari we just get happy. And also, the response you get from staff, whoever, everyone just responds with that happiness [and referring to the services provided by Thari]... I would say that it has really helped to change the culture [of the schools]. (Rita – Thari manager)

The participants' observations regarding the improvement of discipline in schools and the positive impact of the work done by CYCWs on children receiving psychosocial services align with the notion that a changed mood among students can contribute to a beneficial shift in the school's culture.

[Talking about changes seen in discipline] You can see that these learners actually are aware of them [CYCWs] and you see the relationship. They trust them and they know that they are a parental figure. They just have a different mood [referring to children]. (Star – Forum)

When children receive effective psychosocial support from CYCWs, they may experience improvements in their emotional wellbeing and behaviour. A more positive and stable emotional state can lead to better interactions between children and educators, resulting in reduced conflicts and disruptions in the classroom. As the number and nature of conflicts decrease and a sense of respect and cooperation is fostered, the overall school culture can become more positive, supportive and conducive to learning.

Subtheme: General contributions the programme made to schools

The role of CYCWs extended beyond addressing relationship problems among the children; they also served as mediators in staff conflicts. While the frequency of such occurrences was not explicitly stated, their ability to fulfil the role of mediator indicates the versatility and effectiveness of well-trained CYCWs in promoting a harmonious school environment.

Yes, they are good, or the best mediators because they are not only concentrating on relationship, only on children, but also on staff members. Because you will find sometimes, more especially in big schools where there is a number of staff members, there is always a conflict, but in most cases Thari becomes mediators in such cases. So they really help us a lot. (Aubrey – SBST PS)

The Thari programme's contribution to the school-based support teams (SBSTs) within schools is a noteworthy aspect of its impact on children's education and wellbeing. By supporting and strengthening the SBSTs, the programme enhanced the services provided to children, leading to significant improvements in their educational experiences.

And also our SBST became more functional because we now meet, maybe we had referred a case to Thari then they will ask us to meet them so that they may give us feedback on the learner, or the learners. So we meet now and again because of Thari, our kids are now more functional. (Didi – SBST PS)

The support offered by CYCWs in reading and writing can have a significant impact on children who may be struggling academically. Their guidance and encouragement can boost children's confidence and motivation, leading to increased engagement with their studies. This additional academic support complements the work of educators and contributes to a more comprehensive approach to enhancing children's educational outcomes.

Thari had helped our learners to read and write because after school our [CYCW] we also, I identify those learners who are slow learners, so I was referring them to our [CYCW] took those learners in her office every day after school, maybe ten or fifteen learners to help them to read and write. And so our learners improved because of Thari. (Debra – SBST PS)

One of the main objectives of these after-school programmes was to create a safe and constructive space for children, reducing the likelihood of their involvement in gangs. By offering engaging and supervised activities, the programme provided an alternative to gang-related activities and negative influences that could potentially lead children astray.

After school, there is a programme that the CYCW was responsible for. They meet to do homework; they also have other activities, like for example playing soccer and netball This was also one of the programmes that was meant to also assist the learners, in terms

of moving them away from gangsterism and involving them in sports. (Mpumelelo – Principal SS)

The Thari programme's strategic targeting of low-performing schools that experienced serious problems proved to be a successful intervention. These schools, once plagued by numerous challenges, have experienced a remarkable transformation in their performance and are now regarded as well-performing schools.

These are the schools that we regarded as trouble schools. I am inclined to believe that that has something to do with them choosing such and so if they chose the schools that were known to be trouble schools it means that they wanted to impact on them. They are now on the same par with the likes of Mafeking who are in the first place, they are not even counted as among the trouble schools. So yes, that is why I say in education it is very clear their contribution and their impact. (Star – Forum)

The contributions of Thari programme have been instrumental in creating safer schools, fostering a positive school culture, enhancing relationships among children and educators, improving academic results, and supporting children in various ways. By addressing both the emotional and academic needs of children, the programme has created an environment that is more supportive and conducive to learning, promoting their overall wellbeing and success.

Subtheme: Creating safe schools

One of the primary objectives of the Thari programme was to create safer schools. Through the provision of psychosocial services and the establishment of safe parks, a number of changes were identified and are described below.

The observation that children model the fighting they witness in their homes, leading to unsafe schools, highlights the impact of their home environment on their behaviour within the school setting. This influence can contribute to conflicts and violence among children in the school. However, the provision of psychosocial services to these children helps to address and reduce such behavioural issues, leading to a safer school environment.

It helps because, like we said, some of these kids they watch pornography or some of them they were watching their parents while they did their fighting, nè, they became angry and then they fight with others, as well as teachers, then we refer them to Thari and then they attend sessions and that sessions works a lot at my school. (Bongi – SBST PS)

Additionally, children with medical problems such as foetal alcohol syndrome face unique challenges in their learning and academic performance, which can lead to frustration. Participating in Thari activities provides them with coping mechanisms to manage their situation effectively. As a result, these children experience decreased anger and become more manageable within the school context.

This anger is due to the inability to read or write due to foetal alcohol syndrome and ... then they play [at the safe parks] and they forget about those things. (Dineo – SBST PS)

Indeed, the Thari programme's initiative in organising a programme aimed at preventing sexual offences had a positive impact on creating a safer school environment. As sexual offences were identified as a problem among children, the implementation of this preventive programme addressed the issue proactively.

They also organised learners when the prosecutor came and gave the Grade 8 and the Grade 9 information about sexual offences... they came here to come and teach them what is appropriate behaviour and inappropriate behaviour. (Gladys – SBST SS)

Since the implementation of Thari's work in schools, there has been a notable decrease in the problem of gangs within the school environment. Thari's efforts, which include interventions such as psychosocial support, preventive programmes and creating safe spaces, have contributed to addressing the factors that might lead to gang involvement among students.

...if you say the problem of gangsterism, we also started with classes, the school couldn't go on the whole day, and the gangsterism ... [it] is the same gangsters that we have, or that we used to have, and that they have subsided now. (Mary – SBST SS)

Thari has been successful in promoting school safety, with children experiencing a sense of security both within the classrooms and on the school premises. This positive feedback suggests that the programme's efforts have effectively contributed to a safer school environment.

I think in a way, with the experience that we have here, they are getting it right. I can confirm that there is an element that shows that, really, in the classroom there is a degree of safety. And then within the premises, there is a lot of guarantee that we can tell that there is safety. And we do not have that much conflict where learners are fighting amongst themselves. (Mpumelelo – Principal SS)

The Safe Park initiative had a positive impact. Children attending the Safe Park during breaks has led to a decrease in fighting and stealing among students. The Safe Park serves as a secure and supervised space where children can engage in positive activities during their free time, providing an alternative to engaging in negative behaviours.

Actually, it's adding the value. For example, during breaks, instead of learners sitting in the classrooms, fighting, stealing from one another, they go to the Safe Park. They play games there. So, it also helps to reduce the misbehaviour from the learners. (Soviet – Principal PS)

Tina's account reinforces the positive impact of the CYCWs visiting children's homes and providing support to both children and their parents. Through this engagement, the CYCWs have effectively contributed to reducing bullying incidents within the school.

I think also, those children who misbehaved at school or who are bullying others. When the Thari counsellor visited their homes, they changed their behaviour. (Tina – Principal PS)

Working with the SBSTs allowed educators to gain insight into the life world and experiences of children who presented with behavioural problems. This newfound understanding fostered empathy and compassion, leading to a change in the educators' attitudes. As a result, conflicts between educators and children decreased, and a more harmonious and supportive atmosphere was created.

...you can see that also the attitude was creating the unsafety and, you know, there was just that misunderstanding between the children and the educators. As adults, you know, you want to punish and things must be right. So, now they were able to really get into this child's world and see what is happening. And yes, I think it did, it did contribute a lot. It did contribute a lot, yes. (Rita – Thari manager)

The discussions highlighted the significant role of social work and psychosocial support services provided by social service professionals in both improving academic results and creating safer schools. These services proved to be crucial in addressing the emotional and behavioural needs of children, which had a positive impact on the overall school environment.

Since 2017, the experience I had is that there are schools that were named no-go schools due to violence, gangsterism, and the performance of the learners was always down. I will refer to [name of school] as one of them where we have seen, since 2017 the Grade 12 results were going up until I think last year. ... So, I will definitely say that whatever we are doing such as social work services, and psychosocial support services at school can contribute to safer schools. (Harry – Social worker)

Indeed, the above results indicate that the Thari programme significantly supported the creation of safer schools through various interventions and initiatives. The discussion section will highlight other notable contributions made by the programme to schools.

DISCUSSION

The project's findings highlight alarming levels of violent behaviour among children, possibly intensified by abusive and neglectful home experiences, leading to anger and alienation. Some children may seek gang affiliation as a coping mechanism, drawn to the culture of violence and belonging provided by such groups. School violence has far-reaching consequences, affecting children's physical and mental wellbeing, resulting in anxiety, depression, poor concentration, increased absenteeism, drop-outs and weak academic underperformance (Makota & Leoschut, 2016). Previous research links a lack of a sense of belonging to engaging in gangs as a substitute (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2019), driven by the sense of camaraderie and mutual support gangs offer (Maringira, 2020).

Township schools face multiple problematic factors exacerbating the challenging nature of the learning environment. Poverty, as documented by Hendricks (2018) and Rishel et al. (2019), affects children's wellbeing and educational outcomes. Additionally, hunger and fighting for food underscore safety challenges (DBE, 2015). While the Thari programme does not directly address poverty, it identifies vulnerable children and supports their families, enhancing learner wellbeing.

Gang culture as well as alcohol and drug abuse compound the safety concerns (Hendricks, 2018). Children not involved in gangs may turn to substance abuse to cope with family challenges, further contributing to school violence (DBE, 2013; Hendricks, 2018).

Bullying persists as a pervasive issue in township schools, with detrimental consequences, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, aggression, truancy, and drop-outs (Reyneke & Jacobs, 2018). Thari's approach supports both perpetrators and victims with awareness campaigns combatting bullying and providing psychosocial services to help them deal with anxieties (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2022).

Class disruptions, fuelled by poverty, overcrowding, inadequate facilities, lack of community discipline, and crime (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013), present barriers to learning. CYCWs provide essential support, fostering mastery, resilience, motivation and self-assurance (Brendtro *et al.*, 2019). Respondents mentioned that investigations and psychosocial services offered by the CYCWs helped reduce disruptive incidents (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2021b). Therefore, the programme contributes to the vision outlined in the National School Safety Framework (DBE, 2015) and aligns with the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014).

Another pressing issue is teenage pregnancy, which has emerged as a matter of great concern in South African schools. According to Statistics South Africa (2021), a staggering 33 899 births were recorded in 2020 among mothers aged 17 years and younger. Moreover, research has indicated that 7.8% of girls between the ages of 7 and 18 are unable to attend school because of pregnancy (Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2020). The implications of child pregnancy are deeply troubling, as these young mothers are forced to shoulder roles and responsibilities for which they are unprepared, often leading to school drop-out (Gauteng Department of Education, 2012). This study corroborates the adverse impact of teenage pregnancy on educational outcomes. Furthermore, it is noted that some of these pregnancies are the result of rape and sometimes gang rapes. The programme ensures that, in line with section 110 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2006), these cases are reported to the authorities.

The prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS, among some girls in schools raises further concerns. CYCWs play a crucial role in providing psychosocial support and facilitating medical assistance for these children, supporting them through their challenging situations. When examining the scope of practice for Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWs) in the auxiliary category, the South African Council for Social Service Professions (2023) does not explicitly clarify whether facilitating medical assistance and support with reading and writing falls within their defined scope. However, this responsibility could be associated with the

implementation of life-space work, where ensuring access to antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) and helping them to read and write becomes an integral part of meeting the day-to-day living needs of the child. This approach aligns with the expectation that CYCWs should actively attend to the health and educational needs of children (Swanzen & Jadrijevic, 2014). School-related gender-based violence contributes to high failure rates and drop-outs, impacting on children's wellbeing (Rishel, Tabone, Hartnett & Szafran, 2019). Thari offers counselling and referrals to child protection agencies for further investigation and support.

Addressing these complex challenges fosters a safer and supportive learning environment for all children. Thari's efforts mitigate violence, family issues, teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence, promoting learner wellbeing and academic success.

A negative school culture has been linked to various behavioural problems, including aggression, low student engagement, school drop-out and bullying (Reyneke & Reyneke, 2020). To establish a safe school environment, it becomes essential to transform the schools' culture. The findings from the study indicate that such a cultural shift occurred within the schools that implemented the Thari programme. Participants reported improvements in relationships between educators and children, along with enhanced discipline. These positive changes were attributed to the psychological services provided by the programme.

The Thari programme made multiple contributions to the schools to foster safety and improve learner wellbeing. CYCWs played a vital role in improving relationships among children and educators, mediating conflicts that positively impacted on educator wellbeing and classroom dynamics. By reducing educator stress, an emotionally safe environment for children was cultivated (Hochfeld, Schmid, Errington & Omar, 2022).

Functional SBSTs ensured that children received the necessary support, contributing to their overall wellbeing and academic success (DBE, 2014).

The programme also addressed challenges in reading and writing among children, which could lead to frustration and violent behaviour. Individual assistance from CYCWs and programmes at Safe Parks supported children in developing their literacy skills, resulting in improved academic achievement (UNICEF South Africa, 2017).

In response to the gang problem, Safe Parks and school activities provided secure spaces for positive interactions, sports and homework (UNICEF South Africa, 2017). A reduction in gang affiliation was reported by respondents.

The implementation of Thari led to a decrease in violent incidents within schools. Children who accessed psychosocial services and participated in positive activities at Safe Parks exhibited lower tendencies to engage in aggressive behaviours, thus fostering a safer school environment. This shift in behaviour could also be attributed to the children's need for social support, as many instances of aggression towards others may serve as a manifestation of a cry for support (Meyer & Chetty, 2017). The provision of psychosocial support by CYCWs played a crucial role in

nurturing positive relationships between children and educators. As children's emotional needs were addressed, conflicts and tensions between students and teachers decreased, contributing to improved school community relationships. This finding aligns with Hawkes's (2021) perspective that school safety begins in the classroom, and strong educator-learner relationships enhance the effectiveness of counselling programmes.

Addressing the trauma resulting from violence was essential, as it could lead to behavioural issues in schools (Sciaraffa, Zeanah & Zeanah, 2018). Schools should ideally create a safe environment for children, both physically and emotionally, removing barriers to learning (Makota & Leoschut, 2016). The ultimate goal of the Thari programme was to ensure children's safety during school attendance (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017). Significant strides were made in this direction through the provision of psychosocial services, support for children and parents, teaching coping mechanisms, and implementing prevention programmes. Participants reported decreased gang activity and an overall sense of safety. Safe parks also contributed to safety by engaging children during break time and after school, leading to reduced conflicts and better academic performance with homework support. CYCWs played a helpful role in counselling bullies and investigating the underlying causes of their behaviour. Collaborating with the SBSTs and raising educator awareness of children's problems and needs further improved relationships, ultimately reducing conflicts in the classroom. Overall, the psychosocial services provided by social service professionals significantly contributed to establishing a safe learning environment for children.

The Thari programme aligns well with the developmental approach to service delivery, which is evident in its provision of community-based services. CYCWs extend their services to clients beyond schools, reaching Safe Parks and conducting home visits to offer additional support to children and their families. Moreover, individual development plans are formulated to ensure comprehensive support, including psychosocial support, counselling, referrals to external organisations, and the development of basic life skills. The programme's emphasis on macro practice and its holistic service delivery approach further emphasise its alignment with the developmental paradigm. Participant feedback indicates that social service professionals within the Thari programme adhere to the principles and philosophy of the developmental paradigm (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2019; DSD, 2013; National Association of Child Care Workers, 2014; Patel & Hochfeld, 2013).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has several limitations. First, the use of non-probability purposeful sampling restricts the generalisability of the findings to other schools. Second, participant feedback, while appearing honest, should be considered with caution because of potential bias, as some participants were directly involved in the programme. Moreover, conducting interviews during the Covid pandemic, with participants wearing masks, posed challenges to communication clearly, leading to possible missed information during transcription as a result of inaudibility at times. These limitations

highlight the need for cautious interpretation and emphasise the context-specific nature of the study's results.

CONCLUSION

The research aimed to characterise the behavioural challenges encountered by educators in township schools and examine the impact of the Thari programme on modifying learner behaviour. The findings reveal that educators face issues such as volatile behaviour, gang activity, substance abuse, bullying, sexual and reproductive health concerns, and poor school attendance as major problems. Many of these issues contribute to an unsafe school environment. The Thari programme addresses these concerns through its social services, catering to children displaying such behavioural problems. As a result, it facilitates a transformation in the schools' culture, enhances their functioning, contributes to improved academic performance, and, most significantly, fosters safe schools and enhances learner wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study suggests that providing children with access to social services within schools is a valuable initiative. To address school violence and gang-related issues, schools should consider hiring school social workers who can offer preventive and early intervention services. Additionally, when children require statutory care, appropriate referrals should be made to organisations with statutory powers.

To maximise the impact of social workers' services, their efforts can be complemented by CYCWs, who can provide crucial support to families within their households. Hence, it is recommended that schools integrate CYCWs as part of the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative. These CYCWs should undergo comprehensive training, receive adequate supervision, and become integral members of the social service professionals' team within the school environment.

The Thari programme or Thari model, with its proven effectiveness, should be expanded to encompass schools struggling with poor academic achievement, experiencing high levels of violence, and with children requiring additional support to enhance their wellbeing. By implementing the Thari model in such schools, the programme can extend its positive influence, fostering safer and environments more conducive to learning, while promoting the overall wellbeing and academic success of children.

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