

**PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES FOR ADOLESCENT MALE LEARNERS
WITH BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS: A CASE OF THREE INSIZA DISTRICT
SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MATABELELAND SOUTH PROVINCE, ZIMBABWE**

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to examine how educators provided psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems in three Insiza District Secondary Schools, Matabeleland South Province. The study was guided by interpretivist paradigm, adopted qualitative approach and employed case study design. Data were collected from a population sample comprising twelve male learners, three educators and three counsellors through focus group discussions for learners, and in-depth semi-structured interviews for educators and counsellors. The results of the study revealed that educators established the needs of the individual learners first before applying the intervention. The study found that the strategies used by educators to provide psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners involved promoting mindfulness, promoting social, emotional and behavioural learning, enhancing connectedness among learners, staff, and families, providing psychosocial skills training and cognitive behavioural interventions and guidance and counselling. The findings further indicated that adolescent male learners with behavioural problems were taught life skills such as team work, responsibility, good decision making, critical thinking, stress management, health and life skills, honesty and integrity. They are also taught tolerance, self-sufficiency, relationships, self-esteem, self-control, communication skills, conflict resolution, and leadership skills and community involvement. The study established that educators encountered a number of challenges in provision of psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behaviour problems. The challenges comprised inadequate training, stress and emotional strain, lack of support, time constraints, difficulty in establishing rapport, and vicarious traumatisation. The study concluded that despite the challenges faced in providing psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behaviour problems, educators in selected Insiza District Secondary Schools used varied strategies to assist learners. The study recommended that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should intensify training of educators to equip them with requisite knowledge and skills on provision of psychosocial support in schools.

Keywords: Psychosocial Support Services, Adolescent Male Learners, Behavioural Problems, Educators.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, adolescent behavioural and emotional problems in schools are a challenge to all who interact in one way or another with adolescent learners namely; parents, educators, peers, communities and other professionals (Cheney, Flower & Templeton, 2008; Robinson, Power & Allan, 2011). According to United Nations (2022) transforming education calls for schools and other learning environments to become more responsive to learners' needs. National governments

and education stakeholders should prioritise strengthening education systems to ensure every adolescent has access to safe and supportive learning environments that promote and respond to their learning, development and mental health, and psychosocial well-being needs. This can be done by developing and implementing long-term and sustainable school-based psychosocial support policies, strategies and services that respond to learners' and educators' overall well-being at all times and in all contexts. Thus, adolescence is a unique phase in human development, during which young boys and girls have just started on the path to finding their identities, and becoming independent and self-sufficient adults. It is a crucial period for developing the social and emotional habits important for mental and emotional well-being. Rapid physical, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial development affect the way adolescents think, feel and interact with their external and internal environments (Duci, 2022). Educators and other education personnel, therefore, play a crucial role in promoting and protecting learners' mental health and psychosocial well-being. Positive relationships with educators can ensure adolescents feel safe, seen, supported and have a sense of belonging. Hence, this study intended to find out how educators provided psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behaviour problems in selected Insiza District Secondary Schools in Matabeleland South Province, Zimbabwe.

Background

Psychosocial wellbeing is a necessary condition for any human being to realise their full potential and to lead fulfilling, healthy and productive lives. People that have psychosocial wellbeing are confident, have self-esteem, feel safe, and are able to solve problems, make decisions, build positive social relationships, work together and resolve conflicts (Government of Sierra Leone, 2015). Hence, there is need for schools to provide psychosocial support services to adolescent learners. According to INEE (2016) the term psychosocial support refers to the actions that address both the social and psychological needs of individuals, families and communities. The Government of Zimbabwe (2018) describes the psychosocial environment as the psychological and social factors that have consequences for satisfaction, health and ability to perform at learning places. The Government of Zimbabwe (2018) further elaborates that the term psychosocial refers to the close connection between psychosocial aspects of one's experiences (e.g. thoughts, emotions, and behaviour) and the wider social experience (e.g. relationships, tradition and culture). Learners and teachers are psychologically affected by the surrounding social conditions that may disrupt or enhance the quality and effectiveness of learning.

According to UNICEF (2011) behavioural problems in schools affect both girls and boys. It is a cause for concern as male learners are on the forefront destabilising learning environments. Sexual and gender-based violence directed to girls is a particular concern. Studies from the United States indicate that boys are generally subject to violence more often than girls, but that girls to a larger extent than boys are victims of certain severe forms of violence, which include sexual violence (UNICEF, 2011). The type of violence which boys engage in range from assault and harassment of others on their way to and from school to bullying at school, sexual harassment and physical abuse (UNICEF, 2011). Thus, learners and teachers require an environment that is physically safe, emotionally secure and psychologically enabling in relation to their gender, physical ability and socio-economic status (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018).

Schools and learning environments that intentionally promote learners' mental health and wellbeing, attendance and attainment, give adolescents the best possible chance to fulfil their potential. For instance, social and emotional learning approaches that include whole-of-school interventions, and specific interventions for at-risk adolescents, have proven effective (UNICEF, 2022).

Literature has identified the most psychosocial stressors that learners face as those related to family concerns of poverty, absent parents, domestic violence, parents' physical health and parents' mental health. Additionally, negative environmental factors in the schools such as gangsters, bullying and stigma, personal factors such as teenage pregnancies and substance abuse and lastly learning disorders, depression, anxiety and suicide ideation have been found to be prevalent psychosocial stressors among adolescents in South Africa (Pillay, Patel, & Setlhare-Kajee, 2023). Consequently, there is need for schools to provide psychosocial services to learners so that there is effective teaching and learning.

In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) in 2018 crafted the Zimbabwe School Health Policy in a bid to address the unmet needs of adolescents and younger learners who have undiagnosed physical and mental health challenges. Schools should ensure that all learners are protected from all forms of physical, sexual, and emotional violence and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018). The MoPSE encourages schools to provide psychosocial support services to learners through guidance and counselling services to empower learners with life skills and to aid learners in distress through appropriate psycho-social support and referral to and through the Schools Psychological Services. Internal support and onward referral systems shall be periodically reviewed to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018).

Notwithstanding the steps taken by MoPSE, public concerns have been expressed through mass media and other channels of communication that the country has documented cases of adolescent learners committing suicide, as well as instances of stabbing each other to death in or out of school premises because of unmet and concealed mental and physical wellness needs (Chidarikire & Chikwati (2024); **Gwarisa, 2023; Moyo, 2023; Paridzira, 2023; Razemba, 2023; Staff Reporter, 2023; Tshili, 2023; Online Reporter, 2021**).

Given the highlighted observations, it has been noted that there are some secondary schools that are making efforts to provide psychosocial support services to adolescents who are experiencing behavioural problems. However, it is not clear how those secondary schools provide psychosocial support services to male adolescent learners who are experiencing behaviour problems. Therefore, it was essential for this study to examine how educators provided psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems in three selected Insiza District Secondary Schools in Matabeleland South Province.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

World-wide, the provision of psychosocial support services in secondary schools has gained significant attention in the recent years. Adolescents face various challenges regarding mental health and well-being, and educators play a fundamental role in addressing these issues. This section, therefore, reviews literature on strategies used by secondary school educators to provide psychosocial support to male adolescent learners. By interrogating existing literature, this study aims to shed light on effective interventions that result in positive impact on male adolescent learners' emotional and social development. Hence, in provision of psychosocial support services, literature suggests that schools should increase learners' mental health literacy, promote mindfulness promote social, emotional and behavioural learning, enhance connectedness among learners, staff, and families, and provide psychosocial skills training and cognitive behavioural interventions (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2023).

Schools are critical to help identify and provide early interventions for adolescents facing multiple stressors. Increasing learners' mental health literacy promotes mental health and well-being by helping identify mental health concerns and facilitate access to timely and effective intervention. This could be done by delivering classroom-based mental health education curricular and implanting peer-led modelling programmes (CDC, 2023; UNICEF, 2022)

Regarding the promotion of mindfulness, scholars describe mindfulness as a skill that involves intentionally bringing one's attention to the present moment by noticing thoughts and sensations in a non-judgmental and nonreactive way. Practicing mindfulness can help learners manage stress in their everyday lives and regulate their emotions and behaviours. Educators are advised to offer small group mindfulness activities (Dray & Wisneski, 2011). Educators can also initiate school-based programmes that promote social skills and emotional development by focusing on self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-awareness. Additionally, schools can enhance learners' feeling of connection to their peers, teachers, and the school community through relationship-building interventions (CDC, 2023).

Schools can teach specific skills to learners to help them cope with their thoughts and behaviours. Cognitive behavioural interventions teach learners to identify their own unhelpful thoughts and replace them with alternative thinking strategies. These interventions also often try to get learners to engage in positive activities and coping behaviours in their lives, which can improve their moods and other symptoms of mental distress (DeLuca, Tang, Zoubaa, Dial, & Yanos 2021). Some of these interventions focus on concepts that are also taught in social skill and emotional development programmes, such as self-regulation and decision-making (CDC, 2023). Studies reveal that educators in some South African schools indicated that they provide psychosocial support through using empathy and affirmation; counselling and referral to other sources, among other strategies (Mahwai & Ross, 2023).

Various scholars have made noteworthy efforts to bring to light the several constraints that hinder effective provision of psychosocial support services in secondary schools. These challenges include inadequate training, poverty-related issues, vulnerable populations, stress and emotional strain, lack of support, time constraints, difficulty in establishing rapport, and vicarious traumatisation.

Studies have indicated that many educators lack relevant qualifications to provide comprehensive psychosocial support to learners. That is, inadequate training can hinder teachers' ability to address the diverse needs of students effectively. Thus, due to the various overlapping psychosocial challenges that learners simultaneously face, many South African teachers feel they are not sufficiently equipped to support their learners. Notwithstanding attending some external training on psychosocial interventions, the results of the study indicated that school teachers lacked basic knowledge and insights on the psychosocial interventions (Pillay, Patel & Setlhare-Kajee, 2023).

Literature also reveals that poverty related stressors can impact learners' emotional well-being, making it challenging for educators to provide adequate support. Furthermore, educators encounter vulnerable learners who require targeted psychosocial assistance. Thus, identifying and supporting such learners might be demanding, especially, when resources are limited (Tual & Omandam, 2023; Lubawa, Ngirwa & Shavega, 2021; Geldenhuys & Youngleson, 2010). Khumalo (2022) confirms that educators who engage in providing psychosocial support may experience stress and emotional strain. It is assumed that regular exposure to learners' emotional challenges can take a toll on their well-being. Educators in South Africa also mentioned experiencing vicarious trauma when helping learners (Mahwai & Ross, 2023).

It has been observed that sometimes there is lack of support from parents. That is, in some of the challenges faced by the learners their parents needed to be involved, however, the parents did not always come forward when requested to do so. Again, the educators' dual role of teaching and supporting learners is not always feasible as educators might have limited time to attend to learners' needs (Mahwai & Ross, 2023).

With regards to reviewed literature, it is evident that educators encounter numerous challenges in the provision of psychosocial support services to adolescent learners in secondary schools. For this reason, this study sought to gain an in-depth understanding on how educators provided psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems in three selected Insiza District Secondary Schools. The following research questions guided the study: (i) How do educators in Insiza District Secondary Schools, provide psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems? (ii) What are the challenges experienced by educators in the provision of psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems in Insiza District Secondary Schools?

3. METHODS

The study adopted the interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm enhanced a more detailed understanding of the research questions and results which led to a balanced conclusion on the phenomena under study. A qualitative approach was used in this study because it analyses words, reports and detailed views of participants in their natural setting. The approach explored the research setting extensively, in order to obtain a rich, in-depth understanding of how educators provided psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems (Babbie, 2017). The researcher employed a case study design because it allowed acquisition of a rich narrative from participants' perceptions and experiences while conducting their duties in

providing psychosocial support to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems through the psychosocial systems available in their schools. The study population comprised 18 secondary schools in Insiza District of Matabeleland South Province from which 144 male learners, 24 educators and 24 school counsellors were targeted. From the target population, three secondary schools in Insiza District were chosen from which 12 male learners, three educators and three counsellors were purposively selected as a sample.

In-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data which were coded, transcribed and thematically analysed to address research questions (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003). To enrich trustworthiness and credibility of the results, the researchers audio recorded interview sessions to ensure an accurate reflection of the participants' views, transcribed interviews verbatim and provided thick descriptions of the data (Tracy, 2010). Regarding ethical considerations, the issues of consent, privacy and confidentiality, and protection from harm were respected by the researchers in data gathering, management and reporting (Willig, 2008). To observe confidentiality, the responses from school educators were coded SE1 – SE3, while responses from School Counsellors were coded SC1 – SC3. Focus group discussion responses from adolescent male learners with behavioural problems were coded FGD1 – FGD3.

4. RESULTS

4.1 How educators provide psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems

The participants were asked to give their views on how educators provided psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems. According to responses, educators established the needs of individual learners first before the intervention. They did so in order to select the appropriate strategy which suits the behavioural problem experienced by a particular male adolescent learner. For example, strategies like increasing learners' mental health literacy, promoting mindfulness, promoting social, emotional and behavioural learning, enhancing connectedness among learners, staff, and families, providing psychosocial skills training and cognitive behavioural interventions and guidance and counselling, would be used depending on the nature of the behavioural need of the learner. Some of their responses are as follows:

As educators, we look at the nature of the problem and then establish how we should deal with the problem. Every problem is unique to the learner, hence, we should find the most suitable strategy to deal with the problem (SE2).

They once called in the Zimbabwe Republic Police to come and address us as a school on issues to do with drug and substance abuse and gender based violence (FGD1).

As a school counsellor, I try to identify the problem as I interact with the male learners with behaviour problems. After identifying the need of the learner then I assist him accordingly. For example, I invite such learners for counselling sessions (SC3).

When asked how effective was the needs identification method in assisting male learners with behavioural problems, the participants had this to say:

It is effective to some extent and addresses the needs of the learner but since the learner is not an island and will get back to his community which will push him back to the behaviours he has been doing. We instil mindfulness and promote social, emotional and behavioural learning as a way of providing psychosocial support among male learners with behaviour problems (SE1).

To a lesser extent it is effective, it is not easy to convince the learner what he has been doing is wrong and what he had learnt all along was wrong and the school is right (SE3).

It is effective as the needs of the learner are met, and new positive behaviours are seen (SC1).

The participants were further requested to shed more light on how the parents were involved as a strategy to assist learners. Their responses revealed that educators enhanced connectedness among learners, staff, and families. This strategy yielded positive results as some parents showed willingness to work with educators in implementation of interventions. For example, some of the participants' responses are as follows:

As educators we work closely with parents because if we leave parents we will not wholly assist the learner (SE1).

Well, they sometimes do call our parents at school when we misbehave. They call our parents at school and give us a worthy punishment. The school also monitors our progress and helps us to improve after knowing our backgrounds at home (FGD3).

The participants also confirmed that providing psychosocial skills training and cognitive behavioural interventions was a necessity in assisting adolescent male learners with behavioural problems. It was mentioned that the strategy has yielded positive results as some learners have changed and have shown improvement in their academic performance. For instance, some participants said:

We teach them team work, responsibility, good decision making, negotiations and critical thinking, stress management, health and life skills, honesty and integrity (SE2).

They are taught interactive aspects, that is, how to interact effectively with other people, tolerance, self-sufficiency, relationships, self-esteem and many others (SC3).

The issues taught include self-control, communication skills, conflict resolution, and relationships (FGD1).

I think mostly we are focusing on the social side, life issues like relationships, e.g., talk about abstinence, health issues, leadership skills and communication skills, community involvement (SE3).

It was established from the participants' responses that the needs identification approach used by educators in providing psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems enabled educators to employ varied strategies which include guidance and counselling and also involvement of stakeholders such as Zimbabwe Republic Police. The participants highlighted that the needs identification approach and strategies used were effective as some adolescent male learners have shown positive change in behaviour. The data presented showed that providing psychosocial skills training and cognitive behavioural interventions was a necessity in assisting adolescent male learners with behavioural problems. It came out the responses that adolescent male learners with behavioural problems are taught team work, responsibility, good decision making, negotiations and critical thinking, stress management, health and life skills, honesty and integrity. They are also taught how to interact effectively with other people, tolerance, self-sufficiency, relationships, self-esteem, self-control, communication skills, conflict resolution, and, leadership skills and community involvement.

4.2 Challenges faced by educators in providing psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems

Regarding challenges encountered by educators in providing psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems, the participants pointed out that challenges included inadequate training, poverty-related issues, stress and emotional strain, lack of support, time constraints, difficulty in establishing rapport, and vicarious traumatising. Thus, examples of participants' responses are as follows:

Though we are trained to teach and we have attended workshops on how to provide psychosocial support to learners, we still have some challenges in dealing with some diverse situations. We end up referring them to experts. We need proper training; we lack expertise in dealing with some complicated situations. There is need to be further trained so that we give maximum support to learners (SE1 & SE3).

We appreciate what is done by schools to conduct workshops for educators, however, the training is not enough because some situations that learners are facing need proper training not just a workshop. Educators end up calling the police to deal with the situation because they lack expertise. At times they become overwhelmed by the situation (SC2 & SC3).

There is also lack of support from some parents and guardians. If they are invited to school to discuss their children's behavioural problems, they do not respond (SE2 & SC1).

The other challenge is that of time constraints, it is difficult to cope with dual role of teaching and provision of psychosocial support to learners. There is limited time to attend to learners who need psychosocial support (SE1, SE2 & SE3).

Sometimes our teachers tell us that they are busy, then they turn us away without attending to us (FGD1).

As educators sometimes we experience vicarious trauma, stress and emotional strain, because of the situation these learners will be experiencing. It also affects us as we make an effort to assist them (SE1, SE2 & SE3).

The presented information from participants indicated that the educators experienced several problems which hinder effective provision of psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners in selected Insiza District Secondary Schools.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed that educators established the needs of individual learners first before applying the intervention. It came out from the findings that the strategies used by educators in provision of psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems depended on the individual needs of the learners. The study found that the strategies used by educators to provide psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners involved increasing learners' mental health literacy, promoting mindfulness, promoting social, emotional and behavioural learning, enhancing connectedness among learners, staff, and families, providing psychosocial skills training and cognitive behavioural interventions and guidance and counselling. These findings are in line with observations made by scholars in United States of America and South Africa respectively (CDC, 2023; UNICEF, 2022; Dray & Wisneski, 2011; DeLuca, Tang, Zoubaa, Dial, & Yanos 2021; Mahwai & Ross, 2023).

The findings of this study further indicated that adolescent male learners with behavioural problems were taught team work, responsibility, good decision making, negotiations and critical thinking, stress management, health and life skills, honesty and integrity. They are also taught how to interact effectively with other people, tolerance, self-sufficiency, relationships, self-esteem, self-control, communication skills, conflict resolution, and, leadership skills and community involvement. Thus, the results of this study are in agreement with what is suggested by CDC (2023) that educators should provide psychosocial skills training and cognitive behavioural interventions to learners who need psychosocial support.

The study established that educators encountered a number of challenges in provision of psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behaviour problems. The challenges comprised inadequate training, poverty-related issues, stress and emotional strain, lack of support, time constraints, difficulty in establishing rapport, and vicarious traumatization. The findings are commensurate with the results of the studies conducted in South Africa by Khumalo (2022) and Mahwai and Ross (2023).

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examined how educators provided psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behavioural problems in three selected Insiza District Secondary Schools in Matabeleland South Province. The study concluded that despite the challenges faced in providing psychosocial support services to adolescent male learners with behaviour problems, educators in selected Insiza District Secondary Schools used varied strategies to assist learners. These strategies included promoting mindfulness, promoting social, emotional and behavioural learning, enhancing

connectedness among learners, staff, and families, providing psychosocial skills training and cognitive behavioural interventions and guidance and counselling. Learners were also taught life skills such as team work, conflict resolution, relationships, self-control, decision-making and self-control among others. The study recommended that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should intensify training of educators to equip them with requisite knowledge and skills on provision of psychosocial support in schools.

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