

Art. #2199, 10 pages, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v43n4a2199>

Life orientation teachers' experiences of providing psychosocial support to high school learners in the Johannesburg West district

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In this article we report on a study in which we explored life orientation (LO) teachers' experiences in providing psychosocial support to high school learners in the Johannesburg West district. High school learners are in the adolescent developmental stage, which is marked by major shifts in physiology, cognition, and social interactions, rendering them vulnerable to psychosocial problems. To cope with these challenges, they need sufficient age-related guidance and support. However, there is a shortage of social workers, registered counsellors and psychologists who are trained to provide psychosocial support for these issues in South African educational settings. As a result, LO teachers are frequently left with the responsibility of providing these services. Semi-structured telephonic interviews were conducted with 15 LO teachers from 11 schools (Quintiles 1 to 4) in the Johannesburg West district. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that LO teachers play a critical role in providing psychosocial support to learners. They are, however, exposed to stressful experiences, which make them vulnerable to vicarious trauma, implying that they require support. It is thus recommended that they be provided with opportunities for debriefing and counselling.

Keywords: adolescents; high school learners; life orientation teachers; psychosocial support services; South Africa

Introduction

South Africa is categorised as a developing country (Amadeo, 2020). Among the multiple educational challenges confronting such countries are insufficient resources, a shortage of suitably trained teachers, and lack of teacher support (Turbot, 2016). In former Model C schools in South Africa, counselling services are offered by in-house psychologists who are paid from school fees (Manci, 2016). However, the services of psychologists and social workers are not available to the majority of schools and communities due to school budget constraints (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017) leaving this responsibility to life orientation (LO) teachers and the school-based support team (SBST) (Diale, Pillay & Fritz, 2014), with LO teachers often lacking the necessary training and support. It is acknowledged worldwide that teacher training and support are vital (Stroebel, Hay & Bloemhoff, 2019).

In South Africa, these challenges are exacerbated by the fact that LO teachers are expected to provide psychosocial support to learners who are exposed to violence, poverty, crime, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), drugs, abusive relationships, high school drop-out rates, and teenage pregnancy (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Das-Munshi, Lund, Mathews, Clark, Rethon & Stansfeld, 2016; Inglis & Lewis, 2013; Mwoma & Pillay, 2015), factors that can potentially have a negative influence on their school life (Wood & Goba, 2011). These learners are also in the adolescent developmental stage of the lives. Adolescents in South Africa are faced with complex developmental challenges co-occurring with exposure to and experiences of psychosocial challenges, implying that they need adequate age-related guidance and support to deal with these challenges. Within this context, it is evident that age-specific school-based psychosocial support is needed to help learners cope and build resilience to these psychosocial challenges.

Although trained professionals such as psychologists and social workers are usually better equipped than teachers to provide psychosocial support services in schools (Diale et al., 2014), some literature suggests that teachers are an available, well-positioned resource that could be utilised to provide school-based psychosocial support (Chattopadhyay, 2013; Ebersöhn, Loots, Eloff & Ferreira, 2015; Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2011; Furlager, 2018).

There is, however, concern whether teachers are well-equipped to provide psychosocial support services to learners (Diale et al., 2014). In addition to delivering the LO curriculum, they should ideally possess counselling skills, career guidance skills, and the ability to fulfil diverse roles within the school environment (Pillay, 2012). The implication is that LO teachers should be trained and equipped to provide these services.

A review of the literature reveals a paucity of research on how LO teachers provide support for learners. For this reason, we aimed to gain an in-depth understanding from the LO teachers' perspectives of how they, in practice, "deliver psychosocial support to learners" regardless of their lack of expertise to do so. Specific objectives were to explore: (1) issues addressed by LO teachers and ways in which they identified, assessed, and/or provided psychosocial support to high school learners; (2) challenges posed when providing psychosocial support to high school learners; and (3) resources used when providing psychosocial support to high school learners. It was anticipated that this research would contribute towards gaining knowledge and understanding of teachers' experiences in delivering psychosocial support in South Africa and would yield policy recommendations regarding psychosocial support offered by LO teachers.

Literature Review

Roles of life orientation teachers in providing psychosocial support to learners

Various studies highlight how disadvantaged and vulnerable learners often lack individual emotional and psychological support at school to help them cope with current and future adversities (De Witt & Lessing, 2010; Wood & Goba, 2011). Internationally, counselling and guidance teachers or life skills teachers are expected to help these learners therapeutically (Manci, 2016). In South African schools the LO subject was introduced in 2002 in the hope of equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to develop into confident and responsible citizens (Diale et al., 2014). The curriculum covers the following topics: human rights, religion, health, physical education, career guidance, and life skills (Pillay, 2012). However, Rooth (2005) found that teachers who taught LO in South African schools were not trained to teach this subject because the topic was fairly new in this country. This situation, however, continues to be a problem in South Africa because most LO teachers lack specialisation in the subject, which presents delivery challenges (Diale et al., 2014) as at some schools, teachers teach any learning area even though they have not specialised in that area (Pillay, 2012).

LO teachers are also expected to provide services such as basic counselling. The reality is that they do not necessarily have the training to do so (Pillay, 2012). Additionally, even if LO teachers may specialise in LO at the tertiary level, they are not offered a module that covers the theoretical and practical aspects of providing psychosocial support such as counselling and career guidance to learners. Instead, LO teachers are often targeted by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) for training in basic HIV counselling at the district level (Wood & Goba, 2011). Moreover, Wood and Goba (2011) found that the training agents that provided this training were not familiar with the LO curriculum requirements and school contexts in which teachers worked, which affected the implementation of that training. The LO teachers reported that the counselling course only helped them to become empathetic listeners, and they were not equipped to provide more advanced counselling skills (Wood & Goba, 2011).

South African education policies

South African education policies such as the Education White Paper 6 ([EWP6] Department of Education [DoE], 2001), Screening Identification, Assessment and Support policy (SIAS) (2014), and the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) programme, stipulate that the lack of psychosocial support is a barrier to learning that has adverse effects on learning outcomes. Teachers are often tasked with multiple roles in schools such as teaching and counselling (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017).

This added pressure on teachers often results in fatigue and a decline in teaching performance (Setlhare-Kajee, 2018). Moreover, teachers cannot always provide the necessary psychosocial support to learners (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017; Mwoma & Pillay, 2015; Setlhare, Wood & Meyer, 2017; Setlhare-Kajee, 2018) although some LO teachers have been provided with training in lay counselling skills from the district (Wood & Goba, 2011).

According to the SIAS policy (DBE, Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2014), teachers with the collaboration of parents are given the responsibility to screen, assess and identify learners' needs at school. The teacher is then required to formulate an intervention plan for the learner based on the information that they would have gathered (DBE, RSA, 2014). In the case where psychosocial support is the required intervention, the implication is that the teacher would need the necessary skills to identify learners that have psychosocial issues and then make provision for this support. Should this intervention prove to be ineffective, the teachers can only escalate the matter to the SBST (DBE, RSA, 2014). The SBST mostly comprises a team of teachers and can consist of a few non-teacher members (DBE, RSA, 2014). They first need to evaluate how the teacher identified the barrier to learning and what intervention was applied before they can suggest a different intervention plan with the help of an in-house teacher specialist (implying an LO teacher) (DBE, RSA, 2014).

Empirical research on psychosocial support provided by teachers

Empirical research supports the view that teachers can provide psychosocial support to learners provided that they receive training to do so. Some positive result on interventions aimed at enhancing teachers' capacity to provide psychosocial support to learners with various needs have been reported. For example, a study in which teacher networks were used to address children's psychosocial issues reported how teachers in the Sizabantwana project were able "to mobilise services and resources for children" (Mitchell & Jonker, 2013:110). In a study by Ferreira and Ebersöhn (2011), it was found that teachers' involvement and high levels of motivation in providing psychosocial support to learners and the community contributed substantially to the positive outcomes of the supportive teachers, assets and resilience (STAR) programme.

Challenges confronting psychosocial support programmes

Although the CSTL programme lists psychosocial support as a priority area, it seems that this idea is not translated into practice as programmes that focus on providing this service do not take precedence for school management, district officials, provincial and national education departments. For example, the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI)

programme was abandoned due to time and money constraints (Babedi, 2013). Similarly, in a study by Mitchell and Jonker (2013), teachers in the Sizabantwana project reported having experienced issues with the school management and a DoE official, who allegedly tried to sabotage the programme by denying teachers the right to attend cluster meetings, making them believe that it did not have departmental approval. Furthermore, at the 2015 Departmental Briefing, Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, corroborated the view that soft issues (referring to psychosocial problems faced by learners), have been neglected in the push for maths and sciences (DBE, 2015).

The theoretical lens guiding the study is described against this backdrop.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study was the developmental assets framework. Atkiss, Moyer, Desai and Roland (2011) assert that this framework is a strengths-based model used to assess the development of healthy adolescents. It is an approach that was developed by Benson and his colleagues at Search Institute (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers & Geldhof, 2015) to identify and build positive nutrients needed by adolescents to develop to their full potential (Borowski, 2019). This framework postulates that for all youth to succeed the focus needs to be shifted away from identifying problems and reducing them to identifying and increasing assets or strengths that form the building blocks for positive adolescent development (Scales, 1999).

The developmental assets framework has been reviewed systematically, and researchers have found and classified 40 developmental assets that form the building blocks needed for adolescents' positive development (Atkiss et al., 2011). These assets are divided into internal and external assets. According to Scales (1999:113), internal assets refer to the "values, skills, and competencies young people develop to guide themselves, to become self-regulating" which are categorized as commitment to learning, positive values, social, and positive identity. External assets refer to "the relationships and opportunities adults provide young people" which are categorised as support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time (Scales, 1999:113).

This approach differs from normal interventions in which the focus is on dealing with the problem only (Borowski, 2019). Furthermore, the developmental assets-based framework highlights the need for and importance of fostering a caring and loving environment in which adolescents can thrive (Benson, Scale & Syvertsen, 2011). This framework, therefore, seeks to enhance both the individual aspects (behavioural, attitudinal, personal) and the context (schools, families,

neighbourhoods) (Benson et al., 2011). This theoretical model, therefore, views adolescent development positively and holistically.

The focus in our study was on psychosocial support to learners provided by LO teachers, which is framed by external assets in the developmental assets-based framework. This focus implies that LO teachers play an important role in shaping adolescent learners' lives by providing them with the necessary support.

Method

We adopted an exploratory research design located within a qualitative paradigm to investigate how LO teachers provided psychosocial support to adolescent learners and their experiences in doing so.

The study population consisted of LO teachers from high schools in the Johannesburg West district. Participants were accepted for the study if they met the following criteria: they had to be high school LO teachers who provided psychosocial support and they had to be employed in a school in the Johannesburg West district. We (the researchers) conducted 15 interviews with LO teachers.

Schools were identified through a contact person at the Johannesburg West District-Based Psychosocial Support Unit. The principals of the schools were contacted via electronic mail (email) and telephone and were asked to recommend LO teachers who provided psychosocial support services to their learners. Thereafter, the recommended teachers were approached and invited to participate in the study.

Due to the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, and the need to comply with social distancing procedures, it was necessary to switch from semi-structured face-to-face interviews to semi-structured telephonic interviews. Telephonic interviews allowed us to record and transcribe the participants' responses with their permission, instead of taking detailed notes (Visagie, 2015). The purpose and objectives of the study were addressed by using a self-designed semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. Ways in which LO teachers provided psychosocial support, challenges posed, as well as resources used were among the topics addressed. Examples of questions included: (1) As an LO teacher, what is your understanding of the role that you play as a provider of psychosocial support services? (2) Have you had any training in providing psychosocial support? (3) How do you identify learners that need psychosocial support?

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis as this approach allows for the identification of themes, sub-themes, and patterns of behaviour that emerge from the interviews (Visagie, 2015). The ATLAS.ti software package was used to help code and identify themes and sub-themes that

emerged from the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of analysis were adopted as follows: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) producing the report.

Guba and Lincoln's (2005) techniques for establishing the trustworthiness of research include credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. Credibility (internal consistency) was enhanced through sharing the semi-structured interview schedule with experts for inputs, providing a detailed description of the methodology and theoretical framework and thick descriptions of participants' responses. To enhance transferability (generalisability), thick descriptions of the research responses were provided. To enhance dependability (reliability) the transcripts were audited several times to ensure the accuracy of the data collected. To establish confirmability (objectivity), member checking was employed to check whether our findings were consistent with the participants' views. Authenticity (fairness and transparency (Amin, Norgaard, Cavaco, Witry, Hillman, Cernasev & Deselle, 2020) was enhanced through efforts to present a balanced perspective and to obtain fully informed consent from participants.

The Gauteng DoE and the Johannesburg West district both granted permission to conduct this study. The Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg granted ethics clearance no. REC-01-037-2020. All participants provided informed consent to voluntarily participate in the study, as well as consent for the interviews to be recorded.

A limitation of the study was that it employed a small, non-probability sample which precluded the generalisation of the findings to the broader population of LO teachers in South Africa. A further limitation relates to the effects of history. History effects refer to "the uncontrolled events that can influence the outcome of the research" (Visagie, 2015:51). This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown, which resulted in schools being closed and travel and physical contact with participants were limited. Efforts were made to minimize these effects by amending the data collection method from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to telephonic interviews. It is also acknowledged that the pandemic could have influenced LO teachers' ability to provide psychosocial support. A further limitation was that we were assisted by a contact person at the Johannesburg West district to select schools for participation, which may have introduced a degree of bias as the contact person may have decided which schools were to be

included.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of Participants

LO teachers who provided psychosocial support to high school learners participated in the interviews. Their ages ranged from 21 to 60 years. The ethnicity distribution of the sample was diverse as it comprised several Black African ethnic groups: Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, Tswana, Sotho, Venda, and Tsonga. Most (13) of the LO teachers were female. In terms of experience, most (10) of the teachers had less than 10 years of experience in teaching LO and providing psychosocial support services to high school learners. The teachers were drawn from 11 schools in the Johannesburg West district. Most of the schools (eight) fell in the lower school quintiles (Quintiles 1 to 3) which are categorised as non-fee-paying schools and cater for needs of learners from the poorest geographical areas (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019).

When LO teachers were asked about their training, some (six) teachers mentioned that they were not trained to provide psychosocial support, while others (eight) mentioned that they had received workshop training from their district. However, the training they had received seemed to differ, as some teachers' training had some depth because it was practical and included counselling training while other forms of training merely involved relaying information. Most participants who had received training from the district felt that their training was inadequate as their capacity to provide psychosocial support was limited and they needed additional training to enhance their counselling skills.

Furthermore, it seemed that all the LO teachers in this study also lacked specialisation in the subject but were nevertheless still expected to not only teach the subject but to also provide psychosocial support services such as guidance and counselling. According to Pillay (2012), LO teachers require specialised knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to provide adequate psychosocial support to learners. However, our findings infer that most LO teachers in this study were not well-qualified to teach the LO curriculum nor render psychosocial support services to learners, which posed delivery issues. Learners' experiences with psychosocial challenges were, therefore, not resolved optimally. This notion is further highlighted in the results section.

Against the backdrop of the teachers' profiles, findings in respect of each of the study objectives are presented and discussed and responses by the participants are quoted verbatim.

Objective One: Issues that LO Teachers Addressed, and Ways in which They Identify, Assess and Provide Psychosocial Support for High School Learners

Issues addressed

The main issues that LO teachers addressed included (1) learning difficulties, (2) social challenges such as abuse by family members or mothers' boyfriends, child-headed households, bullying, substance abuse, and interpersonal conflicts with parents, family members, and boyfriends, (3) psychological challenges, (4) economic challenges such as "grant money... used to pay machonisa [colloquial term for a moneylender]" (Participant 9), (5) health challenges like HIV/AIDS treatments and contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) from being raped, and (6) spiritual challenges such as "Amadlozi [spiritual ancestral figures]" (Participant 14) outbreaks in the classroom.

It was evident from the LO teachers' responses that high school learners tended to experience a complex web of adversities that often stem from interpersonal relationships with their intimate partners and families, the broader socio-economic context, health issues, and spiritual factors. This finding is similar to findings from various studies that indicate that negative interactions that adolescents have with peers, families, and communities can become risk factors for developing psychosocial maladjustment (Kirke, 2006; Laursen & Collins, 2009; O'Donohue, Benuto & Woodward Tolle, 2013). Participants' responses also corroborate policies such as the SIAS (Southern African Development Community, 2010), CSTL (MIET Africa, 2015), and EWP6 (DoE, 2001) which state that many South African learners experience learning barriers at certain points in their schooling life.

The developmental assets framework views support from the family, other adult relationships, and a caring community as external assets that are needed to help adolescents develop internal assets such as positive identity. However, LO teachers' accounts in this study revealed that this support for learners was not always forthcoming; instead, family members may have victimised them. The implication was that they did not provide them with the external assets that ensured their safety in their homes, which interfered with their ability to develop internal assets such as personal power, which refers to the adolescents' ability to feel that they have control over their lives (Atkiss et al., 2011).

Identification and assessment

According to the SIAS policy (DBE, RSA, 2014), LO teachers should be able to identify and assess learners' needs. The LO teachers described how they identified learners in need of psychosocial support services through their (1) observational skills, (2) assessment tools, (3) personal accounts, and (4) other people's accounts. For example, in terms

of observational skills, Participant 11 said that they observed "... the behaviour of the learner", and Participant 3 said they observed "their appearance." With regard to assessment tools, Participant 1 stipulated: "Yes, we use SIAS documents. We have the SNA-1 (Support Needs Assessment) and SNA-2 (Support Needs Assessment)...." With respect to personal accounts, Participant 6 explained that "children that have those problems bring themselves." LO teachers also reported that they were not always the ones who identified learners in need of support, and used accounts of other educators, parents, and learners' friends.

These findings are corroborated by other studies. For example, researchers argue that learners' attendance, participation, and achievement are impacted by negative psychological experiences, which may result in poor academic performance (O'Donohue et al., 2013). Furthermore, physical appearance can also demonstrate children's circumstances and neglect (Rose & Hatzenbuehler, 2009). The use of SNA 1, SNA 2, reliance on other teachers, friends, and parents to identify and assess learners' needs is also supported by the SIAS policy (DBE, RSA, 2014). According to Nel, Lazarus and Daniels (2010), these assessment tools focus on identifying the type of support that is needed by learners. This concept is consistent with the developmental framework, which advocates for identifying and increasing learners' assets and strengths, instead of only identifying problems and reducing them (Scales, 1999).

Providing psychosocial support

LO teachers reported providing psychosocial support through using (1) empathy and affirmation; (2) counselling; and (3) referral to other sources. For example, in terms of empathy and affirmation, Participant 7 reflected: "Most importantly, I give these kids love. You give the kids love so that they will be able to love other people. So love is very important that is the basic. Money can't buy love but if you give the kids love, some of them were never told that they are smart and that they are loved." With respect to counselling, Participant 3 explained: "Our children have a lot to say to us, especially when a child that has already chosen you, do you understand?" Participant 15 expressed the view that she provided psychosocial support "by counselling them, as I said we are not professional when it comes to that but by the little information that we have." With regard to referral, Participant 14 commented: "and then if it's beyond ourselves then we call the professionals the ones who uh studies this uh-um, things."

These findings are consistent with policies and previous studies that stipulate that LO teachers should ideally have the capacity to fulfil more than just their teaching role in the school environment (Pillay, 2012). In relation to the CSTL policy

(Southern African Development Community, 2010) their role should be extended to providing care and support. The participants' responses were also in line with the developmental assets framework which stipulates that "the relationships and opportunities adults provide young people" (Scales, 1999:113) such as support and empowerment, help adolescents to develop more positively. The SIAS policy also stipulates that when learners need more specialised services, they should be referred (DBE, RSA, 2014).

Objective Two: Challenges Posed when Providing Psychosocial Support to High School Learners

Participants faced multiple challenges in delivering psychosocial support services to learners. When asked about these challenges, six themes emerged: a lack of support, time constraints, ethical dilemmas, difficulty establishing rapport, delays in specialised service interventions, and vicarious traumatisation.

Lack of support

Teachers indicated that they experienced a lack of support from social workers from the district-based support teams (DBST), other educators and/or learners' parents. Some participants felt unsupported by social workers from the DBST. This idea was expressed in the following response: "No, you know we are the ones who counsel them and then at the social workers we are discouraged by the attitude you see ... when we get there, they don't take care of us you see, they will do their own things and ignore us" (Participant 6). It was clear that the lack of support from social workers from the DBST was inconsistent with their role as stipulated in the SIAS policy, which is to support teachers and learners in schools (DBE, RSA, 2014).

Participants also experienced challenges with unsupportive teachers: "... the most challenge that we are facing is lack of support from other teachers as well. Some teachers you find that they are class teachers, and they are not supportive ..." (Participant 15). One participant expressed the view that other educators also needed to be trained so that they could understand what learners were facing and the importance of confidentiality: "and another thing it's a challenge is support from other educators. I feel like they also need some training because to understand you know [pause] when a child is having such problems, how to try and – and give support" (Participant 4).

The issue of confidentiality was also raised: "How to keep the information of the learner confidential ... I've noticed with other colleagues is that learners will tell them things and they will come and tell others – you see which is wrong ..." (Participant 13).

Participants mentioned that in some of the challenges faced by the learners their parents needed to be involved, however, the parents did not always

respond. This notion is highlighted in the following response:

If there are challenges that needs to be followed up ... I need to invite the parents to address the challenge with the parents ... parents are not actively involved. When they are invited to the school, they don't want to come to school. Sometimes they will come with excuses to say, 'I'm working' and sometimes you can't even um say anything... to the learner because some of the things need the parent. (Participant 1)

In analysing these findings, the lack of support was consistent with findings documented in other research. For example, it appears that a lack of support from social workers in the DBST, educators and parents differed from policy recommendations regarding these role players. Firstly, according to the SIAS policy (DBE, RSA, 2014), the district-based support teams' main role is to support teachers and learners in schools. Findings from previous research also supports the importance of parental involvement as it is associated with positive school success (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Thus, teachers and parents should collaborate to find better ways to support learners who are in need of support (DBE, RSA, 2014; DoE, 2001). The lack of support from social workers from the DBST, other educators and/or learners' parents is inconsistent with the developmental asset framework, which advocates for adolescents to be provided with family support, a caring school climate, and nonparent adults (Benson et al., 2011).

Time constraints

It emerged that LO teachers' dual role of teaching and supporting learners was not always feasible as teachers had limited time in which they could attend to learners' needs. One participant's response conveyed how time as a resource was a challenge for her as she could not take as much time as the learners needed to address their problems: "The challenge is that we do not have time isn't it? ... So, I do not have time, you see like to sit with them for like an hour like a social worker or a pastor or what" (Participant 3). Similarly, Mancini (2016) found that time constraints prevent the successful provision of counselling support to children, as teachers are so overwhelmed with the teaching workload that they do not have adequate time to devote to counselling. In contrast, participating teachers in Wood and Goba's (2011) research were found to spend more time on providing counselling for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) than on the LO curriculum. It seems that LO teachers struggle to balance teaching the LO curriculum and providing psychosocial support to learners; it could thus be recommended that schools should allocate a specific period on the timetable dedicated for LO teachers to provide psychosocial support services to learners in addition to the LO subject period. This provision

will ensure that the learners' educational, emotional, and psychological needs are met by an available, well-positioned resource at the school (Nzeleni, 2015). In this way the school will be fostering a caring and encouraging environment that will enhance learners' internal assets framed as a commitment to learning according to the developmental asset framework (Benson et al., 2011).

Difficulty establishing rapport

When learners do not open up it can be difficult for the teacher to provide them with the necessary support that they may need. Participants found it difficult to establish rapport: "... a child maybe they are experiencing something and then we call them and then it's difficult for them to confide in you. Maybe they have their own stresses. Or maybe they are also shy, they think, I don't know or maybe whatever that we are speaking it would be known by someone" (Participant 8). Establishing rapport with difficult learners is a problem even for the specialist (Cook, Brodsky, Gracia & Morizio, 2019). Participants in this study were not sure why some learners were not opening up to them. According to Qina'au and Masuda (2020), there may be many factors influencing rapport, including cultural differences, values and beliefs. Nonetheless, according to the developmental asset framework (Benson et al., 2011), young people should still be provided with external assets in the form of relationships and opportunities that will help enhance their development.

Delay in specialized service interventions

Because social workers and psychologists are not readily available in most communities, there may be delays in the specialised service interventions that they offer. This idea is captured in one participant's response: "Ya, and then again, many times I try to refer them to the social workers, but you find that they are not available. So, our cases take a long time while we trying to counsel the child but not being sure whether we are on the right track" (Participant 6). This response also highlights how the responsibility is left to LO teachers to best support such learners while they wait, even though teachers may lack confidence in their own capacity to adequately support learners. Furthermore, this finding is consistent with findings documented from other research. For example, Mwoma and Pillay (2015) looked at teachers who provide psychosocial support to OVC in primary schools. They reported that the lack of psychologists, social workers and counsellors impacted on counselling structures for learners and delayed interventions (Mwoma & Pillay, 2015). The delay in specialised service interventions impacts on LO teachers' ability to provide learners with the necessary external assets

(psychosocial support services) according to the developmental assets framework (Scales, 1999).

Vicarious traumatization

Vicarious trauma is a term used to describe the emotional and psychological reactions or trauma that caring professionals such as psychologists and social workers experience when exposed to traumatised clients that they help (Pirelli, Formon & Maloney, 2020; Trippany, White Kress & Wilcoxon, 2004). LO teachers mentioned experiencing vicarious trauma when helping learners: "You know what, this route right, it's draining ... things you hear from children are scary and depressing. You see, they affect you personally" (Participant 3). They also expressed the view that they would like to receive training and debriefing to deal with these kinds of trauma: "... because really it's traumatising ... so if there were something that would help with dealing with our own feelings towards what you helping the learners with" (Participant 5). This finding is similar to findings in other research where teachers reported being impacted emotionally and psychologically (Wood & Goba, 2011) or having experienced trauma (Hupe & Stevenson, 2019) while helping learners. LO teachers' efforts to provide psychosocial support services (external asset) to learners at school do impact on their personal well-being, which can in turn affect their delivery of those services.

Objective Three: Resources Utilized when Providing Psychosocial Support to High School Learners

In contrast to findings in respect of Objective Two where some participants mentioned delays in gaining the assistance of social workers and their negative attitudes, one LO teacher acknowledged the valuable role of these professionals in identifying learners in need and providing services:

We also have, look I'm forgetting, the social workers from the Social Development at Roodepoort Child's services. They come at school on a weekly basis, like every Wednesday just to identify learners and then they deal with the learners directly. We also have social workers that are directly from the district. We ... also get help from ... the local clinics. (Participant 5)

LO teachers' use of stakeholders is a way of providing adolescents with external assets such as support and is indicative of adults providing learners with positive input that will help them develop to their full potential (Benson et al., 2011). The outsourcing of therapeutic or specialised services to a network of stakeholders outside of the DoE is also supported by the SIAS policy (DBE, RSA, 2014).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings reveal that the LO teachers fulfil a critical role in providing support to learners in the South African context in which a wide range of

social problems is prevalent. Given the fact that learners spend a large part of their day in the school environment, LO teachers are well-positioned resources and are often the only persons to whom vulnerable learners can turn when experiencing distress. While trained professionals such as psychologists and social workers may be better equipped than teachers to provide psychosocial support services to learners in schools (Diale et al., 2014), one should not underestimate the crucial role played by many LO teachers in the lives of adolescent learners. Together with other stakeholders, they play a significant role in providing psychosocial support to learners in their communities. The developmental assets framework was adopted based on the assumption that LO teachers' provision of psychosocial support services (external asset) to learners develops and enhances their internal assets. It highlighted the fact that LO teachers' use of a network of stakeholders in providing psychosocial support to learners is an example of their efforts to enhance external assets (conducive environments) needed to develop learners' internal assets (Jaworska & MacQueen, 2015).

If LO teachers are expected to adequately provide psychosocial support to learners at schools through, for example, the provision of counselling services, career guidance, etc., then it is recommended that these aspects should be included in their tertiary training (at universities and further education and training [FET] colleges) and they should receive more in-depth in-service training in their respective districts.

Given the stressful experiences to which LO teachers are exposed, and the possibility of them experiencing vicarious trauma, it is recommended that they be afforded opportunities for counselling and debriefing as well as training in dealing with the effects of traumatisation. The provision of district-based psychosocial support services also seems to be delaying delivery of such services to learners; it is thus recommended that the DoE advances the roll-out of school-based psychosocial support services. With regard to the issue of time needed to adequately deliver psychosocial support services to learners, it is recommended that schools allocate a period on the timetable dedicated for LO teachers to provide these services in addition to the period allocated to the teaching of the LO curriculum.

In conclusion, the lack of specialisation in LO, training in providing psychosocial support services to learners, time constraints and district-based psychosocial support services are factors that affect LO teachers' efforts to enhance external assets needed to develop learners' internal assets.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Gauteng DoE, the Johannesburg West district and the participating

school principals for granting permission to conduct this study. We also wish to acknowledge the LO teachers who participated in this study.

Authors' Contributions

LPM conducted the study for the degree MPhil in Social Policy and Development and ER was her supervisor.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the Master's thesis of Lerato Pamela Mahwai.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- iii. DATES: Received: 11 April 2021; Revised: 25 May 2023; Accepted: 24 August 2023; Published: 30 November 2023.

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