

Strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of Psychosocial Social Support in schools¹

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to find the strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of Psychosocial Social Support (PSS) to vulnerable children in secondary schools in Amathole West Education District, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The Psychosocial Support interactive model of 1982 by Merriam and Darkenwald informed this study. A qualitative approach with a case study research design was used as a method of inquiry and was underpinned and framed by the interpretive paradigm that guided the researchers as they generated the data. The target population was all the schools in Amathole West Education District. Four secondary schools were chosen as multiple case studies because they had functional peer-led groups. A sample of 41 participants made up of four peer leaders, four learner support agents, four principals, four Life Orientation (LO) teachers, one district official and 24 learners in focus groups was purposively selected because they were directly involved with the peer-led groups. A thematic text analysis was used and the study revealed that peer-led groups employed four strategies: counselling, referrals, partnerships and circles of friends. The study concluded that vulnerable learners who were identified could not be effectively assisted due to a shortage of resources such as counselling rooms and transport as well as lack of training of the peer leaders. The study recommends that peer-led programmes should be part of the large school curriculum with a specific budget to meet the requirements of such programmes.

Keywords: psychology, psychosocial social support, emotions, stress, abuse, poverty

INTRODUCTION

Globally, schools operate in settings characterised by acute forms of social disruptions: disasters, illness, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, poverty, and social injustice (such as abuse, class interruptions, bullying and rape), which all impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of learners (Nordveit, 2010). Capo et al. (2019) further states that children experience psychosocial problems more than adults do because of sociocultural, socioeconomic and sociopolitical circumstances. These are on the increase the world over, and have affected the wellbeing of most vulnerable children, especially secondary school learners who have an ever-growing ego of identity (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). These problems have detrimental effects on intelligent quotients (IQs), school achievement and socio-emotional functioning of the vulnerable children (McLloyd, 2008). The link between socioeconomic disadvantage and children's socio-emotional

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functioning is influenced by harsh, unreliable child-care practices from the community, parents, peers and teachers, all of which impact negatively on the self (Mutenheri, 2014). More so, socioeconomic disadvantages expose children to serious and long-lasting stressors which render them vulnerable (Mwoma & Pillay, 2015).

Ernest (2014) defines vulnerability as an expected welfare loss above a socially accepted norm. Moreover, the DoE (2011) further defined a vulnerable child as a person who is under the age of 18 years and at high risk of lacking adequate care and protection. It should be noted that children going through social and emotional problems are likely to display a variety of emotions which can affect their schooling or life in general (UNICEF, 2007). For instance, they can suffer from anxiety, anger, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, guilt, shame, sleeping disorders, and depression, hence the need for psychosocial social support (PSS) (Fritzsche et al., 2020). Heath (2014) further states that 153 million children worldwide are orphans. In South Africa, more than 400 000 to 500 000 children are abused every year (Statistics South Africa, 2011). As a result, schools have come up with a number of groups offering PSS such as social workers, psychologists, teachers and learners (Birkett & Espelage, 2015). Psychological issues include emotions and cognitive development and may affect children's capacity to learn, perceive and remember. The term 'psychosocial' is a combination of the concepts of the individual 'psyche' and the social community in which the person lives and interacts (UNESCO, 2006). Social factors are concerned with the capacity to form relationships with other people and may influence vulnerable children to learn and follow culturally appropriate social codes (Zhou et al., 2019). Therefore, children with psychosocial challenges need supportive actions such as love and affirmation, and ensure that the children's basic rights are realised through, sensitively listening and responding to them in times of difficulties (Department of Social Development, 2012). Such programmes assist vulnerable children to adjust and cope with their challenges.

Coping is the ability to find an appropriate reaction to the challenges one is facing (Kennedy & Farley, 2018). It is further defined as a cognitive and behavioural effort responding to specific stresses that exceed the usual capabilities or resources of a person (Department of Social Development, 2012). Vulnerable children may cope with vulnerabilities if they are resilient or resistant to problems.

Resilience is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by the hardships of life, and to bounce back after stressful and potentially painful events (Horn, 2013). It is also important to note that one can only bounce back if one has the capacity to cope with adversities (Brown, Ecclestone & Emmel, 2017). The capacity for academic resilience varies from one student to another, and can grow or decline over time based on the presence or absence of multiple protective factors (that is, individual and environmental assets) that mitigate the academic risks posed by economic hardship (Borman & Overman, 2004). In order to achieve this, vulnerable children need PSS to develop self-confidence and the willingness to accept responsibility and adapt to the challenges (Hellman, Worley & Munoz, 2018). In order to fully understand how children can best achieve resilience, it is best to hear from the children themselves what challenges are affecting them in using the strategies. This study thus used children as the primary participants of the research since previous studies on the strategies used by peer-led groups lacked the exclusive use of self-report measures, that is, no research has been written so far from the perspectives of children on the provision of PSS to vulnerable learners in Amathole West Education District.

Moreover, good family relationships and the environment beyond the family foster resilience in children (Department of Social Development, 2012), and hence the need for collaboration by all stakeholders. These include support or counselling from peers, teachers and the availability of community organisations and services (Marsh et al., 2017). Although previous studies have identified predictors of and variables associated with academic resilience, more research was needed to determine how such support is

provided to vulnerable children by their peers. Thus, this study sought to fill the gap by investigating the strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children in secondary schools.

Orientation/Contextualisation

In recent years, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has been instrumental in supporting children's academic resilience through the initiation of the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) programme to develop and mainstream schools as 'sites of integrated and comprehensive care and support' (DoE, 2011: 11). CSTL has long been recognised as essential elements of an education system that seeks both to ensure inclusion of all children of schoolgoing age and to enable children to reach their full potential (DBE, 2012b). Following this, numerous policies and programmes targeting children have been established in South Africa to address the devastating impact of HIV and AIDS, poverty, and historical inequalities (Tucker et al., 2016). The Department of Education's HIV and AIDS and Social Planning Directorate implements interventions through the CSTL programme aimed at enabling and protecting access to education for children in greatest need by using a wide range of stakeholders (DoE, 2011). The ultimate objective of developing CSTL by the DoE South Africa was to achieve a situation whereby most children were participating in enhancing their welfare and claim their legal rights (DoE, 2011).

Despite the existence of such pro-child policy shifts, inequality in education remains a massive challenge worldwide (DoE, 2011). Not surprisingly, in South Africa, children from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds (that is, limited economic resources, lower levels of parental education or who have lost one or both parents) are less likely to enroll in school and are more prone to dropping out or to progressing more slowly than their more advantaged peers (DoE, 2011).

While South Africa has made good progress with learner enrolment rates for children aged 6 to 14 years since 1994, analyses of attendance by age shows a significant drop in learner retention amongst children older than 14 years (DoE, 2011). Moreover, the Eastern Cape has the highest proportion of poverty, with 76% of children living in poverty (DoE, 2011). In addition, the 2010 ECDoE EMIS statistics indicates that 76.1% of children between the ages of six and 19 years are in school and 23.9% of the children in the same age category are out of school. It should, however, be noted that extensive research has been done on these fragile communities and households together with the role of peers as counsellors, mentors and role models (Tucker et al., 2016), and the results indicated that peer-led groups may have direct impact on core education outcomes; namely, improved access, retention and achievement outcomes (DoE, 2011). This therefore builds a substantial case for intensifying research on the strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children in secondary schools.

It is against this background that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) stepped up efforts to address barriers to education for vulnerable children through mainstreaming CSTL. The framework is intended to provide guidance to all role players within and outside of the DBE who support learners and educators in and through schools. The role of the DBE is to deliver and expand appropriate care and support services in and through schools, and to create an enabling environment within the education system for other stakeholders to support learners (DoE, 2011). In South Africa, the CSTL conceptual framework is based on children as participants in their well-being. The Department of Education has pioneered the placement of a Learner Support Agent in every school and has established a Health Advisory Committee (HAC) to extend care and support to vulnerable children. Often receiving a small stipend from the Department of Education, the Learner Support Agent is usually a member of the local community and is responsible for assisting peer leaders to identify the vulnerable children within the school and local community, assessing their needs and helping them to access appropriate treatment, care, support and social protection using different strategies (DoE, 2011).

Objective

The main objective of this study was to investigate the strategies established by peer-led groups in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children in schools in Amathole West Education District, South Africa. The paper also aimed at explaining the factors affecting the effectiveness of the strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of psychosocial support to vulnerable learners.

The research questions which guided this study were:

1. What strategies do peer-led groups use to provide PSS to vulnerable children?
2. Explain the factors affecting the effectiveness of the strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Psychosocial Support Interactive Model

The Psychosocial Support Interactive Model of 1982 by Merriam and Darkenwald informed this study (Merriam & Darkenwald, 1982). PSS needs are considered within four main categories which are organisations of care, sense of control, validation of experience, and invalidation. Organisation of care maximises the use of different systems in offering support, i.e. identifying or diagnosing the problem of the child and then planning a course of action or providing steps to follow towards assisting him/her. Thus, depending on the severity of the disorder, schools use different strategies to address children's vulnerabilities (Stormont et al., 2003).

Furthermore, a sense of control of a stressful situation lessens the feeling of threat (Dutton, 2006). Therefore, if one is in control, one will be in a better position to take charge or control of a situation. The theory also states that PSS works well when stakeholders use validation; that is, the recognition and acceptance of another person's internal experience as being valid (Greenberg et al., 2017). It may not necessarily mean that one agrees with or supports the feelings or thoughts of that particular person, but that one acknowledges what the person is going through.

In addition, vulnerable children may have experiences of invalidation. Invalidation is when emotions are rejected, avoided, disregarded or negatively evaluated (Dutton, 2006). When a vulnerable child is invalidated, it creates frustration, anger and many other negative emotional experiences for that child, who ends up resorting to inappropriate behaviour to obtain recognition, despite the fact that this recognition is often negative (Brown & Harris, 2012). Invalidation can range from being ignored and unacknowledged to being physically and emotionally abused. Since invalidation carries its own form of pain and suffering, it is imperative that peer-led groups should use strategies which do not promote such. The strategies are highlighted in the literature below.

International perspectives of strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children

Research on strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of PSS has been limited to studies abroad yet the provision of accessible PSS services and protective intervention strategies is of critical importance to all children (de Villiers & van den Berg, 2012). This is particularly true in South Africa where the exposure to violence, poverty and ongoing socioeconomic transformation leads to high levels of stress. Children growing up under stressful circumstances tend to display high levels of stress-related symptoms, impaired cognitive development, poor academic performance, and behavioural and antisocial disorders (DoE, 2011).

The concern for children's well-being as well as the lack of services, programmes and policies that focus on the development of protective factors and the prevention of negative outcomes have resulted in an appeal for the development of youth development programmes (de Villiers & van den Berg, 2012). In this study, peer-led groups used peer counselling, peer partnerships and circles of friends to provide psychosocial support to their peers. Each of these approaches involved children working with other children to bring a positive change in their lives as well as in the lives of their families.

Peer counselling

Literature reveals that one of the strategies used by peer-led groups was peer counselling. In England, Cowie & Sharp (2017) found out that in peer-counselling services, quality control is a very difficult issue when it comes to peer counselling by learners. Vulnerable children need to re-discover their natural ability by getting attention from their peers who should support them by listening to their challenges and providing them with psychosocial support (Cartwright, 2017). Hence, peer counsellors are expected to have basic counselling skills obtained through training. Cartwright further stated that peer counsellors would be learners while they may have occasional training during lunchtimes, after school or during weekends. More so, Perryman & Bowers (2018) highlighted that a day has a limited number of hours to allow effective peer counselling services. In order for peer counselling to thrive, Perryman & Bowers added that adults in the school should create a supportive and proactive environment which values constructive social relationships amongst peers. In a study done by Macfarlane (1997), parents and teachers were accused of consistently underreporting levels of distress and the emotional problems of children in schools thereby making it difficult for schools to identify those that were vulnerable. In Macfarlane's study, learners' vulnerabilities led to deviations in behaviour with some learners dropping out of school. These problems were addressed through essential tonics in healing and caring processes such as justice, integrity and love to those affected.

Peer partnerships

The other strategy that peer-led groups use is peer partnerships. In his study in England, Demetriades (2017) highlighted that peer partnership gives equal weighting to the peer and the partner. This means that the peer leaders and the vulnerable children have a lot to share. Peer partnership is for all students from different districts in the province, and each should be given the opportunity to develop the potential he or she possesses. In addition, de Villiers and van der Berg (2012) in their study on the implementation and evaluation of a resiliency programme for children highlighted that these interpersonal skills buffer the impact of a variety of stressors, and children who consider their interpersonal skills adequate are more likely to build relationships with others. Additionally, Hart (2013) avers that these relationships, provide children with an additional resource during challenging times. Hart (2013) concluded that children's interpersonal skills may improve as a direct result of the maturity and the content of the peer partnership programmes. Peer partnerships have been highly commended because of their ability to allow peer groups to practise interpersonal skills in small-group settings, where participants are able to experiment with skills, receive feedback and imitate effective behaviour modelled by the group leader and other group members through their interaction with others (de Villiers & van der Berg, 2012). The ability to control and regulate emotions effectively is an important component of successful coping, which can be learnt from peer partnerships if peer-led groups and vulnerable children could only find the time to meet freely, share their experiences and practice the skills (de Villiers & van der Berg, 2012). Prior research has examined how age, gender and ethnicity affect the strategies used by peer-led groups, but findings have been inconsistent and are mostly based on studies of children elsewhere, such as in the USA and other developed countries, and not in South Africa (Peek, 2017). This research will fill the gap by using children as the primary participants in this study.

In support, Epstein et al. (2018) state that schools must encourage student cooperation and peer partnership so that the healthy development of children and ultimately society may be fostered. Moreover, partnerships

are of necessity in the world full of ever-increasing insecurities and fears (Boyce, 2016). Thus all stakeholders have a mandate to support peer-led groups so that they can be viable. Among the shortcomings of this strategy were that parents and teachers were less included in these partnership programmes for their long-term success (Sandler et al., 2006). Additionally, Peek (2017) avers that children with the help of adults like teachers and parents can play a big role in reducing personal and community vulnerability and to implement more effective strategies with which to change children's situations.

Circles of friends

Peer-led groups also use circles of friends as a strategy for the provision of PSS to vulnerable children. The approach emphasises the fact that people's behaviour should not always be taken at face value (Taylor, 2017). Sometimes, the most aggressive people are the most frightened or sad; therefore, the circles' meetings should allow the vulnerable children to express their thoughts and feelings. Taylor further stipulates that creating circles of friends for children who are experiencing difficulties with school life is a powerful and exciting process. Furthermore, the climate within the circle of friends should be non-judgmental and should be a climate that gives a vulnerable child hope that he/she is more accepted and liked by others (Taylor, 2017). All these considerations can only be possible if peer-led groups are well managed by skilled adults. Compared to the literature on children's vulnerability, much less has been published regarding children's capacities and contributions, yet more researchers and practitioners are beginning to recognise the potential of children as active agents in traumatic situations (Tisdall, 2017). Thus, this study will add more knowledge on strategies used by peer-led groups by asking children about their experiences with strategies used in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children.

Referrals

The referral system is another strategy used by peer-led groups. Dryfoos & Maguire, (2019) stipulate that the creation of a strong referral system is essential in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children. This is because some children experience problems that cannot be managed by peer-led groups or existing PSS networks in schools (Hanko, 2016). Problems emanating from family disputes or violence, and drug or alcohol abuse may need PSS from professionals (Lee & Ham, 2018). Peer-led groups have only a limited capacity to constitute a professional referral group because the peer-group members have limited training to provide PSS services to their peers (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2019). Furthermore, health centres, police and social development play an important role in establishing referral systems and should provide culturally appropriate assistance in screening and referring vulnerable children (Nkosi et al., 2019). In addition, resilience starts with the community; therefore, a resilient community is one that provides its people with resources for the formation of resilience (Noltemeyer & Bush 2013). In essence, vulnerable children's resilience is well narrated by adults in several studies to both their individual personalities that seek to help them rise above their poverty and vulnerability, and their support structures, in the form of the community, culture and their social relationships with peers and the school (Motsa & Morojele, 2017). Peek (2008) concluded that in order to fully understand the nature and scope of children's vulnerability, there is a need to learn more about the perspectives of children themselves. In addition, Elder and Fingerson (2002) in Peek (2008) highlighted that most previous research on support of children in schools relied on closed-ended questionnaires which may not have concepts and situations that are important when seeking strategies. To fill this gap, this study used open-ended questions. This research therefore followed the ideas of researchers like Boyden (2003) who suggest that researchers should develop participatory, child-centred research methods and approaches which offer children the opportunity to give voice to their own thoughts and interpretations of events.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the interpretive paradigm with the intention of understanding the world of human experience (Kurdziel, Flores & Macfie, 2018). The paradigm is based on the concept that reality is

socially constructed (Mertens, 2016). Hence, the interpretive paradigm was suitable for this study as it allowed the researcher to interact with participants, relying upon the participants' views and narratives on the effectiveness of strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children.

Research design

The researchers adopted a case study research design because it allowed them to gather large amounts of data. A case study also allowed the researchers to go into greater depth and gain more insight into the strategies used by peer-led groups. In addition, a case study allowed the researchers to use a number of instruments of data collection such as document analysis and interviews which allowed the researchers to study the participants in their natural settings.

Sample and sampling techniques

The participants were purposively selected and the sample included four Life Orientation (LO) teachers, four principals, four peer leaders, four learner support agents, one district official and 24 learners who were selected because they worked with peer-led groups. Purposive selection of the schools was justified in this study because the researchers were interested in schools which were accessible and had peer-led groups that were established and functional.

Research instruments

The researchers employed three research instruments: semi-structured face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Below is a description of the instruments employed in the study.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were preferred to other forms of interviews in this study because they offered a platform for conversation with the intention that the researchers explored with learner support agents, peer leaders, learners who are peer-group members, district officials and teacher coordinators. Their views, ideas, beliefs, attitudes and challenges were useful in understanding the strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children (Maree, 2007). The study also used four focus groups – one from each school. One group was made up of six learners. Focus groups were employed because it was a quick and convenient way to collect data from the learners simultaneously. The researchers took turns to ask questions to the participants in focus groups. All the participants were given the chance to respond to the different questions. Focus group interactions widened the range of responses and also activated forgotten details of experience that may have discouraged participants from disclosing information. To triangulate the data, learner support agents' monthly reports, peer leaders' minute books, diaries, policy documents or circulars, and the Screening Identification Assessment and Support (SIAS) tool kit were used. The reports indicated the strategies used by peer-led groups as well as the evaluations of the events carried out. The evaluations indicated if the activities were carried out or not. Peer leaders' minute books indicated all the events which they planned as well as whether they achieved the goals for the week or not. The SIAS tool kit was analysed in order to see if the strategies used by peer-led groups matched the strategies mentioned in the SIAS tool kit.

Data analysis

The first step in data analysis was reading and re-reading the transcripts so that we are familiar with our entire body of data (i.e. all the face-to-face and focus group interviews and documents) before we went any further. At this stage, the researchers made notes and jotted down early impressions about the data by noting the verbatim utterances included in the result section. Themes were generated when similar issues and ideas expressed by participants within the data were brought together by the researchers into single categories or clusters (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To achieve this, the researchers read through the transcribed data so as to see the emerging themes and patterns. It was also important that the researchers identified the repetitive thoughts or languages and patterns that linked the participants and their setting

together when analysing the data (Koivu & Damman, 2015). Coding for patterns was done by looking at words or phrases which captured action, or were used by two or more participants during interviews. The coding was both natural and deliberate – natural because there were mostly repetitive patterns of action and consistencies of what the participants said during discussions, and deliberate because one of the researchers' goals was to find these repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in participants' responses as documented in the results section. In the analysed data, participants repeatedly mentioned information which researchers identified and classified as the different strategies used by peer-led groups in the provision of PSS to vulnerable children. The analysis of results clearly indicated that peer-led groups used counselling, partnerships, circles of friends and referrals to provide PSS to vulnerable children. However, there were challenges in implementing these strategies. In order to triangulate the data, peer leaders' diaries, learner support agents' monthly reports, peer leaders' minute books, policy documents or circulars and the Screening Identification Assessment and Support (SIAS) tool kit were analysed in order to see if the peer-led groups utilised the strategies suggested in the SIAS tool kit. Peer leaders' minute books also indicated all the events which they planned as well as whether they managed to perform the events or not. Furthermore, the documents were analysed in order to triangulate the data from the interviews so as to verify what the participants were saying during interviews.

Data quality and integrity

In this study, all ethical considerations were observed by obtaining ethical clearance from the University of Fort Hare (reference number REM271SCH101). Permission was sought from Amathole West Department of Education and a permission letter was issued for us to take to the schools where the principals also allowed us to collect data by appointment with the participants (negotiation of entry). In addition, informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality were also observed. Participants in this study were all encouraged to participate voluntarily; that is, out of their own free will. Participants' anonymity was not possible since interviews and focus groups were used in the schools. However, anonymity in this paper was maintained and guaranteed by using codes instead of the names of the people interviewed. Issues of trustworthiness and credibility were obtained through use of multiple data collection instruments (triangulation), that is, the use of interviews as well as document analysis. Member checking was also done by taking the information collected back to the respondents for verification and confirmation of the responses.

RESULTS

This section presents and discusses the themes that emerged from the findings. The participants were coded as follows: LOT1-LOT4, which stands for LO teachers from school 1 to school 4 who work with the peer-led groups; PL1-PL4, which stands for peer leaders from school 1 to school 4; P1-P4, which stands for principals from school 1 to school 4; FG1 (L1-L6) FG4 (L1-L6), which stands for focus group 1 learner 1 to learner 6 since there were six learners in each group; LSA1-LSA4, which stands for Learner support agent 1 based in school 1 to Learner support agent 4 based in school 4; and finally, DO, which represented the district official. The themes that emerged from the data were presented and discussed under the following headings: peer counselling, partnerships, circles of friends and referrals. The results presented below were responses captured from the participants as well as from the documents which were analysed.

Peer leaders, teachers, learner support agents, principals and district officials indicated that they used counselling, partnerships, circles of friends as well as referrals. However, participants indicated that there were several challenges in the implementation of these strategies. These included but were not limited to a lack of meeting time, training in PSS on the part of peer leaders and their teachers, and financial and material resources.

Strategies used by peer-led groups

The first group to be interviewed on the strategies used by peer-led groups were the learners (peer leaders) and the focus groups. Most of the peer leaders and the learners working with peer groups agreed that although they used different strategies to identify and provide PSS to their peers who had psychosocial problems, they faced a plethora of challenges. The general themes which emerged included peer counselling, peer partnerships, circles of friends and referrals.

Peer counselling

One of the strategies used by peer-led groups was peer counselling. Despite the challenges faced by peer-led groups, peer leaders indicated that their counselling services had a strong influence on many aspects of their school life including orientation, social self-concept, interpersonal skills, moral development and religious values. Peer leaders agreed that their peers benefit from their interaction with peer leaders as resource agents because fellow students are usually the first to discover issues demonstrated through behaviours or attitude. This was confirmed by PL1,

We have the opportunity to be role models for the students whose lifestyle or outlooks are unhealthy or in danger. Some are orphans.

PL2 also added,

We talk to a number of our peers who use drugs about the disadvantages for using drugs.

LSA1 also confirmed,

Peer leaders can assist students in finding their 'fit' on campus and can encourage them to take risks and experience something new in their learning environments.

LOT4 explained,

I must however admit that the peer leaders are trying their best to counsel their peers because they are [the] ones in the best position to make early assessment and intervention for students who are at risk. They sometimes bring them to us or the learner support agents (LSAs) if the issues are very serious.

P1 further explained,

Learner support agents work with peer leaders and they assist them to conduct presentations on wellness behaviours to their peers so as to affect changes in their behaviour.

DO also confirmed,

The programme was started with the aim to use learners to support their peers by talking to them if they are having a crisis. As a result of peer support, students may be more confident to pursue their interests, discover community within the campus environment and become more accountable for their actions thereby leading to their retention.

The peer leaders' diaries indicated that they do a lot of informal counselling to their peers. The Screening Identification Assessment and Support (SIAS) tool kit were also analysed and it emerged that the tool kit encourages schools to establish programmes which help all children learn because teachers who understand each child's needs, including the needs of their own children, can better help them learn. The tool kit also emphasises that the identification of vulnerable learners should be coupled with targeted follow-up since this is essential to promoting quality education for all. When the school log book and minutes of previous meetings were also analysed the District Support Teams had not visited the schools by the time the research was conducted. This is despite the fact they were supposed to visit the schools at least once per term to see what was going on and assist where possible.

Referrals

Peer leaders indicated that they also act as a very useful resource and referral agent not just because of their relevant knowledge, specialised training and general accessibility but also because of their proximity to the student experience. Peer leaders revealed that they were in a position to give timely and effective referrals to fellow learners, which can result in a better experience overall.

PL1 disclosed,

Sometimes we counsel them if we can but some of the issues which they raise are beyond our capacity so we refer them to our teachers who will in turn find other social services or psychologists who can further assist them.

PL2 revealed,

We refer those having serious cases to the learner support agent or our teachers since they are the ones who know what kind of assistance one might require.

PL3 also explained,

We tell our teachers that our colleagues have challenges. If the cases require further referrals, they call the police if its drugs and social workers if its rape.

PL4 also added,

These referrals are done by our teachers and we are just there to assist them in identifying learners who have challenges.

When LOTs were asked about the referrals that they make, they all agreed that they receive cases from peer leaders. They confirmed that they need this input from the learners when they are doing a needs assessment because this gives them more accurate and relevant information. They further explained that by giving learners an opportunity to assist them in the identification of vulnerable learners, they actually gave them opportunities to practise leadership skills, model prosocial behaviour, engage in community service and experience their abilities to be change agents in their schools and communities.

LOT1 summed it up and said,

We call the police and social workers to talk to raped children. Some learners told us last semester that a learner had been raped by the groundsman here in the toilets. We called the police and the groundsman was taken by the police. The social workers also assisted the child to move out of the emotional trauma that she had.

The district officer also confirmed the referral strategy. The DO explained that peer-led groups received more help from their peers and their teachers in the school than they did from their parents or people in their communities. This is because parents and community members have in most cases been highlighted as the perpetrators of the cases under discussion. The DO further noted that peer leaders work to intervene in incidents of name calling or bullying in their schools and with strong support from the teachers. No documents were available to show any evidence of presentations of awareness programmes by the peer leaders to their communities or the school at large.

The other strategy used by peer-led groups was befriending. They also explained that they first became friends to vulnerable learners so that they can open up to them.

PL1 stated,

We get close to our peers and we come to learn that they have problems when we are playing with them, we help them to get the help that best suits them.

FG2L2 also highlighted,

We befriend both boys and girls who use drugs and sometimes we find out that they use drugs in our presence. We therefore get an opportunity to talk to them about stopping to use the drugs. We also alert our teachers about it.

Participants were asked if they did partnerships with other peer groups in the communities where they lived. Most of the participants indicated that they were not able to do partnerships because they did not have the opportunities to go out nor to invite others to come to the schools.

FG1L1 had this to say,

I am a peer group member. When we suspect that there is something wrong at home, we make home visits. We are known by the parents too. When the problems are big, we refer the students to our teachers and learner support agents who in turn tell the social workers.

When the LO teachers were asked to comment about strategies used by peer-led groups, they also responded differently.

LOT1 noted,

When we get information about the vulnerable learners from their friends, we sit down with them as a SBST [School based support team]. If we think there is need, we refer them to the department of social work.

LOT3 revealed,

Peer leaders refer different cases to teachers who are the first ones to provide psychosocial support. Sometimes we get sponsorship to assist students with school uniforms, especially those students that come from poor social backgrounds. We also work with the police and the parents.

P1 revealed,

We work with church organisations. We have a group of women's union from a local Methodist Church in our neighbourhood who brought sanitary pads to our school. They also gave us some clothes last year and we sent the clothes to their homes.

P2 also added,

We have seen the LO teachers taking the peer-led groups to other schools where they have gatherings. They do drama, poems and choir. They do fundraising with the assistance from their parents and teachers. The money raised is then taken to charity organisations. This teaches these learners that they are supposed to support their needy peers in their communities.

LO3 summed it up when he said,

We try by all means to work with other groups of people in the communities. The youth groups in the churches around support us a lot but our challenge is the time to visit them regularly and ask for donations or just to have the meetings.

DO further explained,

The peer-led groups do a variety of activities. They do not only do the fundraising activities but they also visit their friends during times of bereavement. They are at high school so they now understand that there is death and that they need to support one another.

Factors affecting the effectiveness of the strategies used by peer-led groups

One of the themes which emerged from the data was the effectiveness of the strategies used by peer-led groups. Participants indicated that, generally, the strategies were not effective because of several factors which set the programme back.

Shortage of infrastructure

Peer leaders, peer-group members and the learner support agents all agreed that the strategies were not so effective because there was a shortage of counselling rooms. This was also confirmed by the teachers, principals and the district officials.

PL1 also highlighted,

For this strategy to be successful there must be space, to use as counselling rooms away from other buildings so that no one will see them going into the room for counselling.

PL2 highlighted,

We do not have rooms to operate in. We go out and sit in the playground, talking to the vulnerable learners. Sometimes the learners will be crying, so we find it hard to counsel them in the open because they end up not telling us their problems because they are shy of other people around us.

FG1L3 also added,

We do not have counselling rooms. We discuss such issues in the playground.

LSA1 further stipulated,

We do not have counselling rooms. I use the library because it is one of the places which is quiet and few people use it. The library is sometimes occupied by children and teachers so when I have a learner to assist it is very difficult to discuss anything sensitive.

LOT2 had this to say,

I am not happy with what the peer leaders are experiencing. Some are willing to come to peer leaders for assistance but they can't because there is no privacy.

LOT2 also reiterated,

There are no counselling rooms. They sit in the school grounds and under the shades of trees.

P1 also added,

I am aware that there is a group of learners assisting other learners and we are making an effort to find space for them. The learner support agent is working from a room behind the classroom blocks which used to be a Grade R classroom.

P2 also added,

Our space here is limited. We do not have enough classrooms. It therefore means that our programme is not effective at all. We will do everything possible to build a secretive place for the learner support agent.

DO also added,

There are no resources in schools. Our programme is greatly affected due to lack of counselling rooms, money as well as teachers skilled to work with the vulnerable children in the schools. As a result peer leaders are failing to identify the vulnerable learners but a lot of these learners are dropping out of school. They need counselling rooms, as well as funds to take them around their communities so that they do some campaigns and be known in their communities.

The researchers noted that there were inadequate infrastructure facilities such as counselling rooms in all the schools and this denied the optimisation of the roles played by peer-led groups in the provision of counselling services. The monthly reports submitted to the district official indicated that there were cases where vulnerable children were referred to the learner support agent in the schools and teachers by peer leaders for further counselling and vetting services but some were not attended to due to lack of time. The peer leader from school 3's diary indicated that they had challenges with working space and that they failed to do some of the counselling sessions because there were no rooms to use as discussion rooms.

Lack of training

Participants indicated that their services were also not effective because they were not well trained and, as a result, they were not able to identify and assist their vulnerable peers.

PL1 also highlighted,

We were trained for three days. We were not trained much in the identification. It is not easy to identify and assist these learners who are having challenges in coping with vulnerabilities.

PL 2 indicated,

Training is attended by only one teacher who is our LO teacher. When he is not there then we have a big problem. We have no one to report the cases to.

PL3 highlighted,

We hardly get enough training time because we are trained during weekend from Friday to Sunday.

PL4 also added,

When we got to the training camp we find out that there are too many activities that we were doing and we failed to finish the activities.

LOT1 highlighted,

Learner support agents are trained to do counselling sessions alongside peer leaders on simple issues. At the training workshops they meet psychologists who sometimes train them on different emotional issues. They go there for a very short period of time usually three days. The peer leaders are often advised to refer cases that are beyond their capacity to professionals such as social workers and psychologists.

In support, one educator further stated that this strategy, although common and widely used, had some challenges.

LOT2 had this to say,

We are trained for only three days. We were given cases to study and we were asked how we could help the people in those cases.

LOT3 reiterated,

When going for training, the peer leaders miss out school for three days and we go out and camp in some places as a district. We mainly rely on nongovernmental organisations for training so they schedule these sessions as they wish. For me it's a waste of time because our learners are too burdened to do such an important job with that minimal training.

P1 also confirmed,

I have never attended workshops myself because they limit the number of those who attend and they specify that they want one teacher and 10 learners per school, so the LO teacher goes with them.

P2 further explained,

For me 10 learners per school is not enough. They must call for more numbers because our society is full of troubled children, so 10 learners per school is not enough to cater for schools with big numbers.

LSA 3 concurred,

We need training in identifying the vulnerable children. We discuss about the learners' psychological problems at their homes. When the problem needs professional help, we refer the learners to social workers. But all this needs a lot of skill and support to do it.

In support, the DO elaborated,

We take 10 learners per school for training on the identification and referral procedures once per year because there are no funds and time is also a problem.

The above findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between school-based interventions and other community-based support groups like the police and social workers. However, strategies were limited in their success since peer-led groups were limited in outreach visits due to lack of time, lack of funds and lack of training. In addition, one of the peer leaders' diaries indicated that peer leaders had visited several homesteads the previous month. In the second diary, the peer leader indicated that they walked for eight kilometres to the homes they visited because they did not have transport.

DISCUSSION

Key findings emerging from the study match those of Hart (2013) who concluded that children's interpersonal skills may improve as a direct result of the maturity and the content of the peer-partnership programmes. This study found that assertions that partnerships promote inclusive, learner-centered PSS activities between the school and the community depend upon the community and home backgrounds of the children involved in the peer-led groups. Partnerships may make it easy for schools to identify children facing challenges at home if peers have the opportunity to meet even after school in the communities where they live. In addition, Bhagwan (2017) proposes that outreach programmes such as partnerships can therefore be mobilised as key strategies for a range of psychosocial support interventions for vulnerable children. The major shortfall which kept on emerging from the participants was lack of training in coordinating the partnerships. This is in line with Bhagwan (2017) who also found that there is need for training of peer volunteers so as to promote the effectiveness of the partnerships as partnership outreach programmes. Thus, the idea of partnerships supports the idea of using a whole-school approach by incorporating flexible, individualised family interventions into the peer-led groups as suggested by the psychosocial support interactive process model which guided this research.

This research also matches previous research by the Harvard Family Research Project (2010) which showed that partnerships can serve to strengthen, support and even transform individual partners, resulting in improved programme quality, more efficient use of resources, and better alignment of goals and curricula.

The findings on circles of friends hint that this method of peer relationship had challenges especially on identifying vulnerable learners in the schools. The study agrees with Taylor (2017) who stated that although the circle-of-friends approach provides a rich opportunity for seeing people's challenges through the way they behave, their behaviour should not always be taken at face value. This is an important finding on the reasons why it is not easy to identify vulnerable children through a circle of friends. On the same note, ideas of Winnicott (2018) have been noted: sometimes the most aggressive people are the most frightened or sad. Thus, under any circumstance, it can be argued that vulnerable learners should not be judged by their behaviour before one comes to know the reason for it. Moreover, these results go beyond previous reports, showing that there was limited training for the peer-group members so it was

not easy for them to identify the vulnerable children. In the same vein, Cowie and Sharp (2017) also recommend that the circle's meetings should allow affected children to express their thoughts and feelings about their problems and to seek support in a safe environment. Thus, there is need for conducive meeting space for the circles of friends.

Cowie and Sharp (2017) found that successful circles of friends were those provided with effective formal training. On the contrary, this study found that peer-led groups go on an annual three-day training workshop which is hardly enough for the task at hand. In addition, Duxbury and Jones (2017) aver that the climate within the circle should be a non-judgmental, hopeful one that enables a child who has previously been at odds with others to feel more accepted and liked. From the results, it is also clear that it is the power of a peer group which mobilises this force to encourage the child to cope with his or her vulnerabilities in more socially acceptable ways within the school and the community.

There was an outcry over the shortage of resources, including infrastructure such as counselling rooms. The notion is supported by Yuca, Ahmad and Ardi (2017) who highlighted that counselling services in schools cannot be separated from the influence of infrastructure facilities needed by counsellors. The results lead to similar conclusions that lack of confidentiality is embedded in peer counselling services when it emerged that peer-led groups used libraries as counselling venues. This result is the same as the results currently accepted from Yuca et al. (2017) who argue that no matter how great the mastery of science and technology of a counsellor, without the support of adequate infrastructure facilities, the expected results cannot be achieved maximally. Yuca et al. (2017) further state that improvement in the infrastructural conditions is also influenced by various factors, including the role of the principal.

In addition, our results indicated that a lack of training of peer leaders is one of the factors affecting the effectiveness of the peer-led groups. This result ties in well with a previous study by Menéndez-Santurio and Fernandez-Río (2016) who concluded that personal social needs and the actualisation of these needs depended largely on the professional skill possessed by the counsellor and availability of counselling facilities. In addition, Abutu (2016) asserts that counselling is the 'life wire' of a school, and that where this is not provided for effectively, there is bound to be the problem of career frustration, academic imbalance and unhealthy relationships among students and teachers in the school.

This study delivers significantly better results on referrals as an important component of peer-led groups. This is consistent with what had been found by Cowie and Sharp (2017) who concluded that in order for peer-led groups to thrive and to be effective, education centres should play an important role in establishing referral systems and should provide culturally appropriate assistance in screening and referring the vulnerable learners to the responsible service providers. Overall, these findings are in accordance with Cowie and Sharp (2017) who agreed that it is best to use whole-school approaches, incorporating flexible, individualised family interventions in all the activities that peer-led groups intend to engage in.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper found that strategies employed by peer-led groups enabled the peer-led groups to access vulnerable children that needed psychosocial support. The peer-led groups used strategies such as partnership, counselling, befriending and referrals which appealed to a wider range of learners with diverse challenges. However, while strategies used by peer-led groups had better chances to appeal to the needs of all kinds of learner vulnerabilities, there were challenges in their implementation which ranged from a lack of resources, a lack of training and a shortage of time, among others. Thus, this study concluded that a whole-school approach would be best for peer-led groups to be effective in every school.

Recommendations

Following the results above, this study recommends that the DBE is to ensure that there is connectivity between home and school by making sure that there are parent and police components in the Health Advisory Committees (HAC). It is the duty of schools, especially the school administrators, not to be syllabus driven; they should promote opportunities for learners to develop emotional competence and problem-solving skills. An important intervention to address compatibility of policy to the school environment and promote connectivity is the formation of school liaison groups. These structures allow feedback from the role players about how consistent policies and practices are with the values, habits, experiences and needs of those whom they are targeting.

Areas for further research

District based support teams (DBSTs) are central to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Care and Support for teaching and learning. They provide a coordinated professional support service that draws on expertise in further and higher education as well as in local communities. Thus, this study recommends further study on the role of DBSTs in the implementation of peer-led group programmes in secondary schools.

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