

The Importance and effectiveness of school counselling programmes

- Lerato Mahwai



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Abstract

The quality of the education system impacts on any society in a variety of ways. This paper proposes the need for psychosocial support services such as school counselling programmes in South African schools to further improve the quality of the education system. Schools have an important role to play in raising healthy children by fostering not only their cognitive development, but also their social and emotional development. It is not just learners' cognitive abilities that are important for performing school tasks; learners' ability to regulate their emotions is also essential as these processes work together to improve academic performance. Research has shown that learners who have access to school counselling programs display fewer signs of emotional distress and present fewer behavioural problems than those who do not have access to such program. This paper concludes that learners need access to psychosocial support services or programmes in place to help them deal with emotional, psychological and behavioural problems that constantly hinders them from performing well in their academic programmes.

The psychosocial well-being of learners from early childhood through higher education is integral to the success of a good quality education system. The quality of the education system impacts on any society in a variety of ways, not least on its ability to innovate. Nonetheless, this holistic development of a learner is hardly ever prioritized in the education system. For instance, in the National Development Plan (NDP) the need for holistic support to learners has been identified, however academic achievement is highly prioritized over the psychosocial needs of the learners. Research shows that the psychosocial development of learners positively impacts learners' capacity to study and learn (Corso, 2003; Schonert-Reichl, 2017), which indirectly improves the learners' academic achievements (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Sink & Stroh, 2003), the very thing that the South African education system desires to attain. This highlights the need for psychosocial support services such as school counselling programmes in South African schools to further improve the quality of the education system.

Psychosocial well-being refers to how culture, social roles, environmental factors and the manner in which a person relates to other people shape the way they think, feel and behave (Burns, 2016). Challenges in this area have adverse implications on the individual's overall health outcomes, such as managing emotional, physical, spiritual, social and cognitive (intellectual or reasoning ability) functions (Davidson & Mc Ewen, 2013).

Many learners are often exposed to various challenges to psychosocial wellbeing, such as living in poverty, loss, family dysfunction, and violence (McLoyd, 1990; Eamon, 2001; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston & McLoyd, 2002; Wilson, Tang, Schiller & Sebera, 2009). These stressors interfere with the learners' processes of learning, their ability to cope with the demands of the school environment, and the pressure to perform well academically. These challenges to psychosocial wellbeing may further result in poor school attendance and in turn lead to negative educational outcomes that may even drive them to drop out of school (Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson & Worthy, 2002). In essence, the lack of attention to challenges to learners' psychosocial wellbeing has adverse consequences for their educational achievement and for the quality of their education.

Various research studies show that learners' ability to process information and the way they perform tasks, think and make decisions, are influenced by emotions such as anger, happiness, fear, mood states, and their preferences. This means that emotions influence how learners engage with their academic tasks, which ultimately impacts on their school success (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg & Schellinger, 2011; Brackett, Rivers & Salovey, 2011). It is therefore not just learners' cognitive abilities that are important for performing school tasks; learners' ability to regulate their emotions is also essential as these processes work together to improve academic performance.

Furthermore, the relationships that learners have with their families, peers, and teachers also influence how and what they actually learn, because they learn in 'collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers, and with the encouragement of their families'. For example, a learner's demography, such as a

parent's unemployment status, can impact on the ways in which the parent and learner interact with one another (Eamon, 2001; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston & McLoyd, 2002; McLoyd, 1990), such as when a parent constantly unleashes frustrations of struggling to find work on a learner, and consistently uses hurtful phrases. This could have adverse effects on the learner, such as producing emotional, behavioural or psychological distress that manifests as underperformance in their school work.

The education system plays an important role in providing opportunities that foster a learner's holistic development outside their homes. Schools have an important role to play in raising healthy children by fostering not only their cognitive development, but also their social and emotional development. This will ensure that they develop to their full potential and grow into effective members of society. Members that can innovate and contribute positively towards a country's economy. Schools are usually the only place where many impoverished children and communities can access such opportunities (Olasfon, 2013; Wilson, Tang, Schiller & Sebera, 2009). However, most schools do not have access to psychosocial support services and programs involving health professionals like school counsellors.

The primary role of school counsellors is to provide psychosocial support to learners. They are responsible for assessing learners' personal and social problems and for promoting mental health. Furthermore, school counsellors' work supports teaching and learning and provides career and moral development guidance (Daniels, 2013; Gendron, 2001). They collaborate with teachers, parents and the community to provide holistic support to learners.

Research has shown that learners who have access to school counselling programs display fewer signs of emotional distress and present fewer behavioural problems than those who do not have access to such programs. School counsellors can identify learners who are at risk of developing psychological problems like depression which negatively impacts on learners' ability and motivation to study through continuous assessment of learners' personal and social issues. They use these assessments to devise suitable interventions aimed to build learners' skills to cope with adverse circumstances and adopt a healthier lifestyle with optimal functionality. Interventions that counsellors use including one-on-one and group counselling, as well as teacher and parent consultations. Research has shown that these interventions help improve learners' academic performance (Sink & Stroh, 2003).

Moreover, school counselling programs have helped improve learners' concentration in class and their motivation to attend school. Emotional distress has a bearing on learners' ability to concentrate in class on what they are being taught, thus negatively affecting their academic achievement. This further demotivates learners from attending school and they may end up dropping out of school; South Africa has an alarming drop-out rate with some research showing that up to half a million young people who start school do not finish the full twelve-year programme. However, when learners receive psychosocial

support from school counsellors, it indirectly results in positive outcomes such as an improvement in learners' academic performance.

Research has also shown that school counsellors have been effective in teaching social skills. Improvement in these skills significantly decreases disruptive behaviour in classes and improves all learners' attitude towards school. Learners whose schools have counselling programs have reported that they feel like the services they receive from these counseling programmes have helped in terms of personal, social and academic support.

It is thus evident that learners need access to psychosocial support services or programmes in place to help them deal with emotional, psychological and behavioural problems that constantly hinders them from performing well in their academic programmes. Learners, especially those living in low income communities in South Africa, often do not have access to psychosocial support services although they may need it the most. Learners' psychosocial well-being should also be prioritised in the South African education system as it would help improve learners' academic performance.