

In-school psychosocial support services for safeguarding children's rights: Results and implications of a Botswana study

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Abstract

In-school psychosocial support services are intended to create safe learning environments for children, enabling the children to attain age-appropriate developmental tasks. This study investigated protections to children's right to safe learning environments through the provision of in-school psychosocial support services. Participants were 230 learners from a cross-section of Botswana schools (females = 124, males 106; age range 10.7–17.7 years; school grades 5 to 12; median age = 14.5 years, SD = 3.65 years). Data on learner access, utilization, and preferences of in-school psychosocial support services were collected using focus group discussions, individual interviews, and a semi-structured survey. The data were analysed thematically and with supplemental quantitative analysis. A social risk management analysis approach was adopted for the interpretation of findings. Learners perceived their schooling rights to be protected when they had direct input into the type, scope, and delivery of the psychosocial support services. Botswana learners are sensitive to social risks to their rights to

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safe learning environments. Children's rights to safe learning environments are likely to be realized with learner-oriented in-school psychosocial support services.

Keywords

Abuse, Africa, Botswana schools, children's social rights, psychosocial, safe learning environments, support services

The Millennium Development Goals are closely aligned and overlap with human rights issues. They also second, embody the most critical facets of the global development initiative (Alston, 2005). These facets include the elimination of extreme poverty and hunger, attaining universal primary-education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, fighting potentially fatal, contagious diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability, and promoting global partnerships for development (Wright & Ndong-Jafta, 2007). These associations continue to be championed by the international human rights community and the global development establishment (Alston, 2005). However, much still remains to be done. The twin aims of creating safe learning environments for children and enabling them to attain age-appropriate developmental tasks can be regarded as envisaged outcomes of the MDGs. In order to realize these outcomes, it is essential to strengthen a wide variety of in-school psychosocial support services (PSSS). In-school social protections are needed for quality learning environments, or those in which learners are treated with respect and dignity (Mpofu, Maree, Kasayira, & van der Westhuizen, 2011).

They are about human rights in their multiplier impact on people's ability to meaningfully and safely engage in basic livelihood activities, including socio-cultural productivity (Health and Community Care, 2010). A framework for the implementation of in-school PSSS should of necessity take cognisance of the guidelines stipulated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UNCRC, 2007). The CRC advocates for the promotion of the rights of all children in general, the protection of all children at all levels and at all times, and consideration of the best interests of children in all actions that affect them (UNCRC, 2007). In addition, it should be based on the conventional framework for the implementation of children's rights, which rests on the following four principles: Non-discrimination (equal opportunities for all children); the best interests of the child (the defining factor in all actions and documents relating to the rights of children); the right to life, survival, and development (physical and non-physical aspects of children's health are covered); and the views of the child (the right to be heard and to be taken seriously) (Olowu, 2002). Health and Community Care (2010, p. 1) describes the concept psychosocial as the 'relationship between the individual and the collective aspects of any social entity', and particularly with the cognitive, emotional and behavioral safety from being a member of a social collective. The school is a social collective in which learner psychosocial safety is a

priority. Psychosocial support services are integral to learner safety in-school or in creating conditions for successful engagement in learning.

Availability, accessibility and inclusivity of a social service is central to its actual implementation (Detsky & Naglie, 1990). Older and well-established education systems such as those in Western countries typically would have comprehensive or inclusive PSSS, enhancing the quality of school life of the learners, and also protecting their rights as children. Within inclusive PSSS delivery systems, beneficiaries (e.g. learners) typically self-target for the services for which they believe they are eligible or in need. Self-targeting involves initiating and following through with access to the appropriate psychosocial services. These actions are more likely to occur in education settings with accessible PSSS (see Mpofu et al, 2005). Inaccessible PSSS carry risks to learner safety in that their support needs may not be met (Eloff, Maree, & Ebersöhn, 2006). We could not identify any studies on in-school PSSS in the sub-Saharan African context in which the learners were the key informants—hence the present study.

Eloff, Maree, and Ebersöhn (2006) have identified the following two psychosocial goals in the African context that impact on the protection of children's rights to safe learning environments (UNCRC, 2007): Utilizing resources appropriately and designing measurable outcomes and clearly defined action plans for PSSS delivery in which learners are primary informants would provide the impetus for responsive learner support services in two ways. First, school learner informants have a right to be heard in matters that affect their lived education experiences. Second, the learners likely would address aspects regarding which they experienced vulnerability or in which their rights as learners would likely be violated and the protections necessary for their psychosocial health and well-being be wanting. When primary participants to social action are supplanted by powerful others in their right to be involved in decisions affecting them, their psychosocial safety is compromised. In the school setting, learner rights are at risk with PSSS driven primarily by external policy interests and with no regard of the views of the learners.

The Botswana context

Botswana is a youthful country with 47% of the population of 1.76 million under 25 years of age. The Botswana National Long Term Vision 2016 (Presidential Task Force, 1997) projected the national goal to allow all citizens access to productive resources and the provision of psychosocial support services for well-being; especially for vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and the disabled.

Many young people in Botswana present with psychosocial needs which schools are best suited to address (Scholarship Development Enterprise Africa [ASDE], 2009, 2010, 2011). Schools as communities of learning provide learners with an additional layer of social protections including their right to a safe learning environment (Jansen, 2009; Karmon, 2007). The Botswana Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MOESD) has a learner support division and an institutionalized school guidance and counselling programme (MOESD, 1996, 2002).

Examples of department portfolios with psychosocial service responsibilities include the school guidance and counselling programme, HIV&AIDS, circles-of-support, and peer education. These service portfolios interface the same learner client base, enhancing the chances of beneficial cross-over effects from the augmentation of similar psychosocial support services to learners. Nonetheless, challenges to implementation remain, and these have not been addressed from the perspective of the learners. Attainment of the national strategic goal to extend social protections to the vulnerable children and youth would require a realignment of existing PSSS for learners and make them more responsive to their rights as learners.

Although programmes are in place to address these needs, the mere existence of programmes alone does not guarantee their effective delivery. Psychosocial programmes should, first, be aligned to existing delivery platforms that both providers and beneficiaries find both credible and accessible, and, second, be implemented effectively (Stockton, Nitza, Ntinda, & Ncube, 2013). Historically, providers rather than beneficiaries have been overly privileged in informing the structure of psychosocial services (Franklin, 2001; Lansdown, 1994; Smith, 1997). Seemingly, the implementation science for the cost-effective delivery of psychosocial support services would be significantly advanced by a careful audit of current services to determine existing strengths on which to construct more cost-effective services, while taking into account possible structural gaps and limitations to the delivery of the services. Long-term planning, realizing the rights of young people to access integrated services, demanding that the government takes the lead, and earmarking specific resources for research to augment the database on which planning for the future is based, are of the essence (Richter, Foster, & Sherr, 2006).

Goals of the study

We sought to understand the nature and scope of learner oriented PSSS for the Botswana schools setting and with the learners as the primary informants. In particular, we assessed learner perceptions, experiences, and preferences of PSSS to better understand their social safety protection concerns in-school. Our primary question of interest was the extent to which learners in Botswana schools perceived in-school PSSS in their delivery to protect their rights as learners. This included the right to be informed of the nature and scope of the PSSS, to freely choose to access such services as would meet their needs.

Method

Participants and context

Participants were 230 learners from a cross-section of Botswana primary schools. By demographics, the participants comprised mostly female learners (54%), and attending school grades 5 to 12 (median age = 14.5 years, SD = 3.65 years). Sampling of informants involved both purposive and random sampling from

schools. First, five of the 10 regions that were surveyed were randomly selected, as were school clusters within the region's schools, classrooms within schools and learners within classrooms.

Data collection

Data were collected using rapid assessment methods (focus group discussions, individual interviews, and a semi-structured survey) and were analysed thematically and with supplemental quantitative analysis. Data were collected from five national regions with the highest concentration of schools. We gathered data on perceived psychosocial needs and services for them as identified by the learners, including on their knowledge about the availability of PSSS at schools, type of PSSS sought, satisfaction with PSSS received, and preferences for particular PSSS and in-school providers.

Procedure

Permission for the study was granted by the Botswana Ministry of Education and Skills Development. Participants assented to the study and principals of the schools gave consent, acting in *loco parentis*. The survey instruments were administered by trained research assistants under the supervision of the second listed author.

Data analysis

Data were thematically analysed; similar information units or categories were synthesized into themes. Axial coding was used to make connections between categories in a systematic manner. At the same time the conditions of the categories were also classified. The technique of constant comparative analysis (Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Merriam, 2009) was used to identify relationships and variations in the data and to conceptualize interactional processes. Data credibility checks were built into the sampling frame by overlapping a proportion of the informants who took individual interviews to also take the in-depth interviews.

Results

Results are presented by key themes emerging from interviews with learners. They cover the following: Availability, accessibility and inclusivity of in-school PSSS, type of services sought, satisfaction and preferences for PSSS, and prospective learner rights oriented PSSS.

Availability, accessibility and inclusivity of in-school PSSS

About 22 to 43% of students indicated they had used the PSSS at their schools. Learners who reported using the psychosocial support services at their schools indicated that they sought such services to address personal, social or other

life needs. The type of help sought includes help with regard to personal, vocational, social, educational, psychological, and financial problems.

The reasons for not using PSSS included structural barriers such as insufficient information provided to them, inadequate material and manpower resources with the schools and poor implementation supervision. In addition, they noted personal-social environment barriers from lack of confidentiality to limitations in the scope of services provided. Specifically, the learners noted the service inadequacies.

Infrastructural barriers

- Lack of counseling items and furniture for the school for the school guidance and counseling (Participant 108, female High school student); maps guiding learners to the guidance and counseling office and the names of guidance and counseling teachers to be mounted on notice boards and schools' entrance for learners to learn about the guidance and counseling services (Participant 55, female High school student); and
- Textbooks for school subject learning rather than love story books needed (Participant 37 male High school student).

Human resources barriers

- Guidance and counseling teachers overloaded with other teaching jobs (Participant 102, male, High school student);
- Guidance and counseling teacher is always busy (Participant 88, female, Primary school learner);
- Schools lacked the trained human resource base to deliver credible PSSS;
- Gender balance should be considered in the managing of PSSS at school level as there were more female than male counselors (Participant 25, male High school student); and
- There were more older age than younger age counselors (Participant 20, female High School student).
- Trained psychologists should be introduced in schools to deal with psychological problems of learners.

PSSS Implementation supervision

Lack of training in PSSS by staff and poor supervision of schools and teachers by Ministry of Education and Skills Development was a barrier to access PSSS:

- In one school some learners were aggrieved by the fact that they were given little food while the cooks kept the food for themselves (Participant 15, male High School student);

- Some teachers will not show up for classes due to learners' low performance (Participant 47, female High school Student);
- School prefects are favoured—compared to ordinary learners, they are given more food (Participant 127, male High school student); and
- Some teachers stereotyped entire streams of students as they openly or publicly shared the view with other teachers that certain streams of students were academically incapable. This lowered students' self-esteem and their motivation to learn (Participant 130, male High school student).

Emphasis on discipline oriented conflict resolution rather than counselling took away from learner responsive PSSS:

- There is no scheduling of appointments (Participant 10, male High school student);
- Guidance and counseling lessons do occur but the guidance and counseling teacher is always talking about behavioural aspects only—that aspect is over-emphasized unnecessarily (Participant 72, male High school student); and
- Even though guidance and counseling services are important in empowering learners with different skills such as decision making, they are not taken seriously by most teachers (Participant 59, female High school student).

Personal-social environment barriers

Learners characterized these as follows:

- Students' personal and family stories would be shared by school counselors with the other teachers so that confidentiality would be breached (Participant 45, female High school student);
- Do not want to share problems with guidance and counseling teachers as all teachers in schools will know my problems (Participant 172, female High school student);
- Students feel nervous because of fear of victimization (especially about home-related problems (Participant 142, female High school students);
- Family would object to home issues being shared with the teachers at the school (Participant 67, Female, Primary school learner);
- The fact that some in-school PSSS providers (e.g., school counselors) were also subject-teachers appeared to introduce a sense of conflict-of-interest as students perceived the school counselor's role to be compromised by an overlapping teaching assignment (Participant 68, female, High school student);
- There is little provision for support for these needs out of school, while some sexual abuse and substance abuse problems resulted from within the school environment (Participant 16, female High school student);

- Learners are always given orders to follow and are not allowed to express their own views (Participant 197, female, Primary school learner); and
- Learners to have independence in choosing who they want to talk to at any (Participant 181, male High school student).

Learner satisfaction and preferences for PSSS delivery in schools

On the question of whether or not learners were satisfied with the delivery of PSSS at their schools, a majority (95%) of those who would have used the services were only somewhat satisfied. Only a few learners (5%) felt they were very satisfied due to the efficient delivery of PSSS provided by the guidance and counseling programme in schools. The learners preferred the class teacher and school guidance teacher to deliver PSSS. Female and primary school learners tended to endorse a higher role of school administration personnel in the delivery of PSSS than male learners and secondary school learners.

Changes proposed by learners to promote effective delivery of PSSS in schools

Learners identified several ways by which PSSS could be better implemented at their schools including communicating to students about the availability of PSSS and how to access them. They also proposed protections for their personal-social wellbeing as consumers of the PSSS services. Learners identified communication needs about PSSS as follows:

Communication

Learners perceived the following communication strategies to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of PSSS:

- Announcements at school assemblies about the availability of the guidance and counseling programmes (Participant 56, male Primary school learner);
- Announcements in classes and to the whole school about the importance of guidance and counseling (Participant 13, female High school learner);
- Informing learners about PSSS during school assemblies (Participant 42, female, Primary school learner);
- Posting information on PSSS on notice boards;
- Talking about PSSS services during registration (Participant 26, male High school student);
- Teachers encouraging learners with problems to go to the guidance and counseling office (Participant 64, female Primary school learner);
- Teachers physically showing learners the guidance and counseling office (Participant 70, male Primary school learner);

- Orientation/clarification of the role of guidance and counseling at school every term; not only once a year;
- Teachers to refer learners to guidance and counseling on matters they cannot handle; and
- Peer support clubs at schools (Participant 58, female High school student).

Learner oriented services

Learners perceived these qualities to enhance accessibility of PSSS:

- Parents and other community members should help in accessing the PSSS at schools depending on the nature of the problem. (Participant 2, male High school student);
- PSSS should help parents and guardians in their parenting roles (Participant 5, female High school student);
- More rest beds are needed in the counseling rooms (Participant 12, Female High school student);
- Guidance and counseling teachers to be always ready to help learners when the need arises—they should be employed to provide guidance and counseling services only (Participant 95, female High school student);
- Learners should be allowed to choose the counseling they are comfortable with to consult whenever they experience problems (Participant 100, male High school student);
- Psychosocial support services to address personal issues including dealing with moods, substance abuse, sexual abuse, and family issues to be addressed in addition to study skills and school adjustment (Participant 104, male High school student); and
- Set up a guidance and counseling centre which ensures confidentiality (Participant 112, female High school student).

Monitoring and evaluation

The learners perceived enhanced monitoring and evaluation of PSSS necessary for their availability and accessibility:

- MOESD should regularly send officers to carry out needs assessments on the general wellbeing of learners from learners themselves. It should not just rely on reports from the school headmasters, which are usually misleading (Participant 32, male High school student); and
- Ban corporal punishment as it does not meet the needs of learners. Young counselors should be available. Providing curtains and tinted windows for counseling rooms to ensure privacy. Disseminate information on the availability of counselors and services (Participant 83, female High school student).

Discussion

To begin with, it should be noted that Botswana is a medium resource country with a relatively short history of institutionalized in-school PSSS. In fact, the Botswana school guidance and counseling program (the main in-school PSSS provider) has fewer than 10 years' full institutionalization (ASDE, 2010) (although early steps to introduce learner support systems date back to the mid-nineties; Ministry of Education, 1994). Prospectively, therefore, as the PSSS system matures to address the aspects learners perceived as compromising their respect and dignity as school community dwellers, they will be more empowered in their use of in-school learner support systems.

Learners expressed their right to know about PSSS to support their quality of the learning environment; a sense of 'the right to know', which is a foundation to obtain other information-based rights (Wright & Ndong-Jafta, 2007). Learners generally had a strong preference for learner oriented PSSS in their design and delivery (see also Maree & Molepo, 2004). This finding suggests that Botswana schools' counselors are perceived by the students as credible resources for meeting their rights as learners if they have training and administrative support.

Learners perceived need for PSSS responsive to their personal, vocational, social and educational development. The latter aspects are standard with in-school PSSS, and incorporated by the Botswana school guidance and counseling programme (ASDE, 2010). However, learners were concerned their social protections in-school were compromised if with lack of supervision by policy implementers. Thus, although PSSS may be in place to address these learner needs, their nominal existence does not guarantee effective delivery.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include the fact that only the views of the learners/beneficiaries and not those of the teacher/educator providers are considered in this study. Without minimizing the importance of learner perspectives in their own right, a more complete understanding of the in-school PSSS as learner social protections is likely with consideration of the views of the educator providers and of the parents as well. Points of convergence in the different understandings of PSSS delivery in the schools would indicate aspects for which actions may be needed in support or redress. Similarly, consideration of the views of non-school PSSS providers may help place research findings into context. Future studies should survey educators, community child care agencies, social welfare services departments, and community members on aspects of PSSS that would ensure a safer school environment for Botswana learners. The current study relied on self-report by learners, without observational data. Future studies should include observational data to determine actual PSSS delivery and impact on child or learner protections.

Implications for the provision of counseling in schools

The findings may have broader implications for the delivery of in-school PSSS intended to safeguard children's right and enable children to attain age-appropriate developmental tasks in a variety of African settings. Quite clearly, learners understood the complexity of PSSS delivery as influenced by the various layers of social responsibility. This is further evidence that learners as a collective can be relied upon to advise policy-makers about programmes they are intended primary beneficiaries of. The imperative to involve the learners in PSSS design and implementation is strong as these services are important to safeguard the safety of children as school community dwellers.

Best practice in PSSS delivery involves the use of universally designed learner support systems which allow for a seamless flow of resources to address learners' needs. Universally designed services allow for consumers to access a broad range of interventions. Communication at all levels of education service on matters related to in-school PSSS is important for safeguarding children's rights as learners. This pertains to referrals by and consultation between and among, teachers, school counselors, educational/school psychologists, and school administrators. Efficient communication about PSSS implementation would ensure both the integrity of the process and adherence to a transparent system-level process for making decisions about resource allocation (Walker, Koroloff, & Bruns, 2010).

Conclusion

Consistent with global trends, young people in Botswana expressed a need for more input into the type and scope of in-school PSSS. Furthermore, the need expressed by participants for protections from psychological-emotional and physical abuse from some teachers and family members would be concerns in other developing country settings. Likewise, targeting learner priority needs relating to personal, social, and educational attainment is in line with global developments in respect of universally accepted children's rights (UNCRC, 2007) and the realization of the MDGs.

Best practice in PSSS delivery involves the use of universally designed learner support systems which allow for a seamless flow of resources to address learners' needs. Universally designed services allow for consumers to access a broad range of interventions. Holistic support programmes that consider all the aspects referred to here may result in long-term improvements in the quality of life for the children of Africa.

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