Learners' Experiences and Expectations: Evaluating Psychosocial Support and Safe Parks in the Thari Programme

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Abstract

Children's mental health is a critical concern in South Africa, particularly given the high prevalence of adverse childhood experiences such as violence and poverty. Despite the absence of reliable national data, it is evident that many children require psychosocial interventions. Schools and Safe Parks are essential environments for delivering these services. This study explores the psychosocial support provided by the Thari Programme to secondary school learners in Botshabelo and examines learners' perspectives on the services that Safe Parks should offer. The Thari Programme, using the Isibindi Ezikoleni Model, employs Child and Youth Care Workers to deliver psychosocial support in schools. Findings show that 89% of learners expressed high satisfaction with the services provided, particularly in counselling, educational development, and life skills. A significant need for additional academic support—such as reading, writing, and homework assistance—was noted, with 48% of respondents seeking help in these areas. Learners also indicated a strong demand for Safe Parks, with 87% expressing interest in using them for sports, counselling, and educational support. However, the study's small sample size and focus on a semi-rural community may limit generalisability. Future research should include a broader sample, and increased promotion of Safe Parks is recommended. The study highlights the importance of employing social service professionals in schools, especially in disadvantaged areas, to ensure comprehensive psychosocial support.

Keywords: psychosocial support; Safe Parks; Isibindi Ezikoleni Model; school social work; child and youth care work; Thari Programme

Introduction

Children's mental health should be a high priority in South Africa. It is estimated that mental health disorders account for 14% of the world's adolescents' (aged 10–19 years) ill health (World Health Organization 2022). Among these, anxiety and depression are the most common, comprising about 40% of diagnosed mental health disorders. Other prevalent conditions include ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), conduct disorder, intellectual disability, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, autism, schizophrenia, and various personality disorders. In addition to these diagnosed conditions, children and young people often experience general psychosocial distress. Internationally, it is also estimated that approximately 45 800 adolescents die by suicide each year (United Nations Children's Fund 2021). These alarming statistics highlight the urgent need to prioritise mental health services for children globally, including in South Africa.

Currently, there is no reliable data to indicate how many South African children experience mental health disorders or ill health (Kleintjes et al. 2022). However, considering the high levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—such as violence, poverty, and neglect—faced by multitudes of children in South Africa (Reyneke 2020), it is reasonable to infer that a significant number of them are experiencing mental health challenges requiring psychosocial intervention. In this context, schools and Safe Parks have emerged as crucial environments where psychosocial services could be effectively provided to help learners manage mental health issues (National Association of Child Care Workers 2018; Skeen et al. 2022).

Children in townships are often left unsupervised when their parents go to work (Bateman 2015). Unsupervised children are at greater risk of becoming victims of crimes and of getting involved in accidents, falling behind academically, socially, and emotionally, and facing a higher likelihood of substance abuse, gang involvement, teenage pregnancy, and school dropout compared to their supervised peers (Afterschool Alliance n.d.). Given these risks, providing afterschool services that protect and support children is crucial. However, many economically disadvantaged parents cannot afford the afterschool services needed to safeguard their children.

Recognising this gap, the Adopt-a-School Foundation identified a critical need for psychosocial support services to enhance mental health and protect children. In response, the Thari Programme was conceptualised to address the needs of at-risk children and their families. The programme aims to "adopt a multi-sectoral approach and strengthen the community to protect women and children against violence and any form of exploitation to create a safe and empowering environment" (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2017, 7). To achieve this goal, the Isibindi Ezikoleni Model[1] was selected as the preferred model for the pilot programme and, consequently, as the framework for

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1   This model was taken over by the Department of Social Development and is now called the Risiha Programme (Department of Social Development, 2021).

service delivery within the targeted community. Utilising this model, the Thari Programme is implemented through three key pillars: providing psychosocial services, establishing Safe Parks, and a multi-sectoral approach facilitated by creating a stakeholder forum within the community (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2021b).

The Isibindi "Circles of Care" Model, developed for the Department of Social Development by the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) in 2001, was created in response to the significant number of orphans and vulnerable children and youth (OVCY) in South Africa. This model employs Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWs) to support children's families in their daily environments and provide services at Safe Parks (National Association of Child Care Workers 2018). Key elements of an Isibindi Safe Park include being a social franchise designed for scale-up, aligning with both South African and international policies, embedding children's rights, and delivering services by trained CYCWs (Dunga and Mhlongo 2017). The NACCW also developed the Isibindi Ezikoleni Model, a school-based model that deploys CYCWs in schools (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2017). The Isibindi Ezikoleni Model is the focus of this investigation.

Although psychosocial services are available through the Isibindi model, and Safe Parks exist in some communities, there has been limited published research on these services and parks. This indicates a gap in understanding the recent developments and effectiveness of programmes using the Isibindi Ezikoleni Model. It remains unclear whether the services provided by CYCWs to children and their families are well-received or what the specific needs of older children are regarding the services offered at these school-based Safe Parks.

This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by exploring the psychosocial support provided to secondary school learners through the Thari Programme. It also seeks to investigate secondary school learners' perspectives on the services that should be available at Safe Parks. By investigating these areas, the study will provide valuable insights that can inform and improve future service delivery in schools and Safe Parks within Botshabelo, and potentially across South Africa and in countries that experience similar problems.

Literature Review

Building on what has already been introduced, the psychosocial services provided to learners and Safe Parks will be discussed.

Psychosocial Services to Learners

Children have the right to access social services, as outlined in Section 28(1)(c) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996). Schools offer an optimal environment for ensuring this right is upheld. Skeen et al. (2022) emphasise that educational institutions are valuable resources for mental health, as they provide

essential infrastructure, maintain networks with local service providers, and offer training opportunities for staff to address the learning and developmental needs of children and adolescents. Furthermore, schools create a supportive network that connects teachers, learners, parents, caregivers, and other community services and organisations. A key benefit of using schools to deliver social services, including mental health services, is that these environments are less stigmatised and more accessible than other service providers. Consequently, the Thari Programme leverages the school setting to provide psychosocial support to learners.

Psychosocial well-being is a multifaceted concept encompassing psychological, social, and personal dimensions, affecting individuals' capacity to reach their full potential as active members of society. It involves various factors, including physical, economic, social, mental, emotional, cultural, and spiritual determinants of health. Well-being requires the ability to manage the daily stresses of life and realise one's potential as a productive community member (Kumar 2020). Thus, when providing psychosocial services, it is crucial to address learners' physical, economic, social, mental, emotional, cultural, and spiritual needs to promote their overall social functioning.

The Thari Programme offers psychosocial services in schools and at Safe Parks in eight schools in Botshabelo, including four primary schools and four secondary schools (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2022a). The services provided cover a wide range of needs, including addressing absenteeism, bullying, child abuse, disruptive behaviour, family disorganisation, gangsterism, health-related issues, material support, assistance with obtaining formal documentation (such as birth certificates and identity documents), neglect, and various forms of abuse, as well as help with accessing social grants (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2022a; 2022b). Additionally, the programme includes preventative programmes, sports activities, and educational initiatives (Reyneke 2024c). These services are primarily delivered by CYCWs in the auxiliary category who have completed a Further Education and Training (FET) certificate in Child and Youth Care Work, equivalent to level 4 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Department of Social Development 2019b).

CYCWs have a well-defined scope of practice encompassing a range of essential duties and responsibilities to provide comprehensive care for children and youth. These responsibilities include addressing the physical, emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and social needs of children; using behaviour management and support strategies; assisting in programme implementation; participating in developmental assessments; ensuring safe environments; offering life-space work and basic counselling; performing administrative tasks; collaborating in multi-disciplinary teams; facilitating developmental play; and advocating for children's rights (South African Council for Social Service Professions 2023). This scope of practice underscores the critical role that CYCWs play in nurturing the well-being and development of children and youth. However, it is important to note that CYCWs at the auxiliary level might not be equipped to perform all these tasks. For example, they are not trained in formal

counselling but can contain situations and refer children to other professionals, such as psychologists or social workers, who can provide specialised services.

Understanding the scope and impact of these services is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of psychosocial support in educational settings, particularly in underserved communities. In the next part of the discussion, attention will be paid to the second focus of this paper, i.e. the Safe Parks.

Safe Parks

The Isibindi Ezikoleni Safe Parks align with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which mandates that all ratifying countries, including South Africa, recognise the child's right to rest and leisure, engage in play and recreational activities suitable for their age, and participate freely in cultural and artistic activities. The Isibindi Ezikoleni Safe Park model supports these rights by establishing Safe Parks at the schools where they operate. In South Africa, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has resulted in many children assuming adult responsibilities in the absence of parents, taking on the care of themselves and their siblings while continuing their schooling (Reyneke 2024d; Kwatubana and Ebrahim 2020). These children need support to manage their academic responsibilities, cope with loss, and handle additional duties such as cooking and cleaning. Children from child-headed households often do not have the luxury of play, which is essential for healthy development and lifelong learning (Matangira 2024), as they assume parental roles for younger siblings.

The Safe Park concept seeks to address these challenges by providing a safe space for children to play under the supervision of trained CYCWs. Moreover, it offers a supportive environment where the stigma faced by children and families affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic is not felt. Additionally, it supports other children who are not directly affected by the pandemic but have experienced ACEs and need a safe space after school, both educationally and psychosocially. In this environment, healing occurs, and a sense of belonging is fostered.

The Thari Programme is based on the Isibindi Ezikoleni Model, which aims to build a safe and caring community for children affected by HIV/AIDS. This programme is implemented by trained CYCWs. It includes the Safe Park initiative, a key component of the Isibindi model, designed to support vulnerable children and young people in the community (National Association of Child Care Workers 2013).

My attempts to gather information about the number of Safe Parks in South Africa revealed that there has been little research on Isibindi Safe Parks since 2016. Relevant studies or reports were not readily available on electronic databases such as EBSCO Host and Academic Search Ultimate. Additionally, the National Association of Child Care Workers website was down at the time of this research, further limiting access to information on Isibindi Safe Parks. According to a 2016 USAID report, there were 114

formal and 352 informal Safe Parks in South Africa. Formal Safe Parks operate on officially allocated land and are equipped with child- and youth-friendly play equipment, fencing, office or storage containers, and toilet and water facilities. Informal Safe Parks, on the other hand, are set up on land negotiated by CYCWs, using makeshift arrangements such as plastic fencing, cones for soccer, bags of toys and equipment, plastic mattresses and pillows, water bottle desks, and gazebos (Dunga and Mhlongo 2017). None of the schools participating in this study had formal Safe Parks. Instead, services were provided after school that mimicked some of the activities offered at formal Safe Parks (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2021).

A project proposal by the Adopt-a-School Foundation (2017) mentioned that the Department of Social Development (DSD) planned to expand the Isibindi model to 1 000 sites across South Africa. However, documentation to confirm this expansion was not found. A 2019 media statement indicated that 335 NGO partners were implementing the Isibindi Programme at 367 sites, with the DSD committing an additional R1.2 billion to the programme over the following five years (DSD 2019a).

Safe Parks within the programme provide communal spaces for children's recreational, educational, and social support activities (Kvalsvig and Taylor 2015; UNICEF South Africa 2017). According to the Adopt-a-School Foundation, Isibindi Ezikoleni Safe Parks serve as therapeutic spaces for vulnerable children who require psychosocial support services and safe aftercare facilities. These services, which help children develop life skills through play, are available after school, on weekends, and during school holidays (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2019).

In line with the original Isibindi model, the Isibindi Ezikoleni Programme offers a variety of services to its beneficiaries (Dunga and Mhlongo 2017; Adopt-a-School Foundation 2017), including:

- Identifying vulnerable and at-risk children, as well as adolescent girls and boys, within the school environment

- Conducting assessments and creating Individual Development Plans (IDPs) for young people

- Providing management and support for individual children, including conducting home visits

- Strengthening families by conducting family assessments and referring parents, particularly women, to parenting programmes

- Managing cases and conducting case conferences within a multidisciplinary team based in the school

- Offering structured developmental programmes for groups of vulnerable and at-risk children in youth-friendly spaces, including peer support groups, structured life skills programmes, HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives (such as condom promotion and enhancing sexual negotiation skills for adolescent girls), educational support (like homework supervision), and economic empowerment programmes

- Advocating for and referring young people to social grants, educational subsidies, and other social protection services, including support with legal matters

- Organising school-based holiday programmes that provide a variety of structured recreational and developmental activities

The services provided by the Isibindi Ezikoleni programme demonstrate a comprehensive approach to addressing the diverse needs of vulnerable and at-risk children and adolescents within the school setting. By focusing on individual assessments, family strengthening, case management, developmental programmes, advocacy, and recreational activities, the programme ensures a holistic support system that promotes the well-being and development of young people. These services enhance children and adolescents' educational and social outcomes and contribute to their overall resilience and ability to thrive in their communities. It also strongly focuses on children's psychosocial development and support (Skeen et al. 2022).

Methodology

This study sought to analyse and evaluate the psychosocial support provided to secondary school learners through the Thari Programme and explored learners' perspectives on the services that should be offered at Safe Parks for secondary school learners. The study focused on the following research questions:

- How do secondary school learners experience the psychosocial support provided through the Thari Programme?

- What services do secondary school learners believe should be offered at Safe Parks?

An exploratory quantitative research design was used to understand the experiences and needs of children in a township community (Rubin and Babbie 2017). The research employed a cross-sectional survey approach (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The study population consisted of all the learners from four secondary schools in Botshabelo, a rural community east of Bloemfontein, which receives services from the Thari Programme. These schools were selected due to their dysfunctional status and the high prevalence of psychosocial problems among their students.

The sample included eight learners from each grade (Grades 8–12) across the participating schools, resulting in 160 participants. Half of these learners were purposefully selected from the caseloads of CYCWs as they had prior experience with the psychosocial services provided by the programme. The remaining learners were chosen through simple random sampling from class lists (Creswell and Creswell 2018). This sampling method was selected to ensure population representation, to minimise bias, and to enhance statistical analysis (Creswell and Creswell 2018). To participate in the study, learners had to provide assent, and their parents or caregivers had to give consent for the learners to participate in the study.

Figure 1 indicates the age distribution of the final respondents. In general, learners usually conclude their schooling at around 18 years, and the data shows that a few over-aged learners took part in this study.
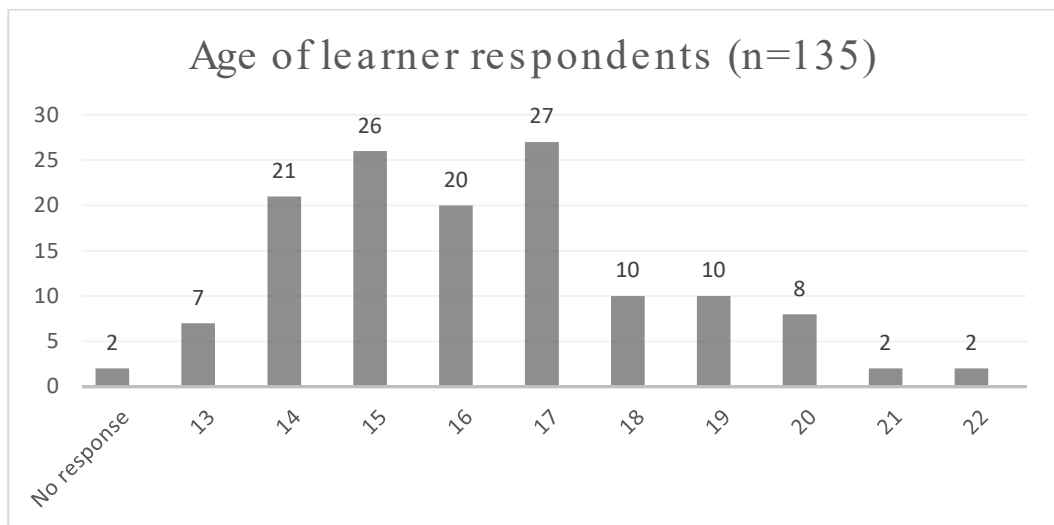

Figure 1: Age distribution of learner respondents

Field workers verbally explained the aim of the study to the identified participants and detailed this in the consent forms. As a result, some sampled children declined to participate (n=135), resulting in an 84% representation rate of learners. According to the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality (Laerd Statistics 2018), the participants' age did not follow a normal distribution (W=0.954, p=0.0002). Consequently, the median and interquartile ranges are reported.

The median age of the respondents was 16 years, with the youngest respondent being 13 and the eldest 22. There was an almost equal gender[2] distribution in the study, with

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2   Gender allocated at birth.

slightly more boys (51.85%) than girls (48.15%). Thus, one gender's voice was not more prominent than the other.

The Grade 10 and Grade 11 learners represented the largest portion (28%) of the respondents. Grade 12 learners were the least represented, at 5%. It can be said that there was a good representation of all the grades except Grade 12 (figure 2). These learners were not readily available, and the researcher tried not to interfere with their academic work as they prepared to leave school at the end of the year. In hindsight, more effort could have been made to collect a larger group of Grade 12 participants and perhaps a smaller number of Grade 8 learners. This is because the latter group had not been in the schools for that long (approximately five months for the first-time entrants), which could have influenced their feedback.
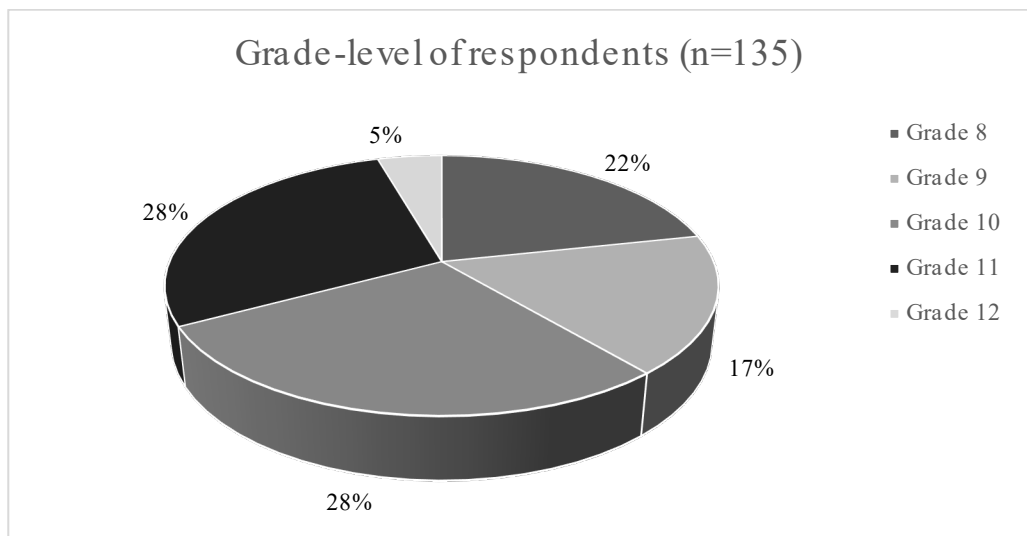

Figure 2: Grade-level of the respondents

The representation of the four schools that participated in this study was more or less equal (see Table 1). School B was the least represented, with 23.7% representation. Since the distribution was so close, equal contributions were expected from the various schools.

Table 1: Representation of schools

School	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
School A	34	25.19	34	25.19
School B	32	23.7	66	48.49
School C	34	25.19	100	74.08
School D	35	25.92	135 (n)	100

Data was collected using a self-constructed questionnaire developed from qualitative data that formed part of the evaluation of the Thari Programme (Reyneke 2024b). The questionnaire's reliability and validity were ensured through consultations with a statistician and a pilot test was conducted before the main study. In each school, four learners completed the questionnaire and provided feedback, which led to minor adjustments for clarity. Most of the questions generated nominal data, making inferential statistics inappropriate. Instead, frequency analysis was primarily used to describe the data. Data analysis was performed by a statistician using SPSS version 29.0.2.0.

Some participants could be considered members of a vulnerable group, particularly those receiving psychosocial services at schools and Safe Parks. To ensure their well-being, CYCWs were available at the schools after completing the questionnaires to provide support if needed and could also refer learners to the Thari social worker. However, no respondents requested debriefing or additional support after completing the questionnaire. Learners did not receive any compensation for participating. Still, they were given a snack before completing the questionnaire, as it was administered after school, and it was assumed that they could have been hungry.

The ethical considerations, as explained in Table 2, were considered (Rubin and Babbie 2017).

Table 2: Summary of ethical considerations and measures taken

Ethical consideration	Attainment
Informed consent	Parents provided consent, and learners gave their assent to participate.
Voluntary participation	Participation was entirely voluntary. The study was explained to respondents during recruitment and again before completing the questionnaires to ensure informed, voluntary participation.
Prevention of harm and participant debriefing	Learners were from a high-risk group (CYCW clients), and others considered at-risk due to the schools' poor performance. If necessary, a CYCW was available for debriefing or referral to a social worker.
Safeguarding privacy, anonymity and confidentiality	The questionnaires were completed in a private classroom after school, ensuring that most other learners were absent. No identifying information was collected, and results were reported confidentially.
Considerations for research on high-risk groups	Certain respondents were identified as part of a high-risk group. To avoid any harm, individuals who might be traumatised by the questionnaire were excluded. Support was available during and after the study.
Secure data storage	All completed questionnaires were stored in a locked cabinet, and electronic data was password-protected.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the General Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) of the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2021/0735/21).

Results

Services of CYCWs in Schools

This part of the data focuses on the need for CYCWs in schools, learners' satisfaction with the services that CYCWs provide and what the learners would like the CYCWs to do at the school.

Need for CYCWs in Schools

A strong need was expressed for CYCWs in the schools, as seen in Table 3. The 11% of unsure learners were mainly in Grade 10 (five respondents) and Grade 11 (seven respondents).

Table 3: The need for CYCWs

Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
Yes	120	88.89	120	88.89
Unsure	15	11.11	135 (n)	100

Satisfaction With the Services of CYCWs

Although certain schools are reported to have CYCWs offering services (Lekganyane 2020), based on the researcher's experience, few schools actually have CYCWs actively providing services. In cases where schools have CYCWs, it remains unclear how satisfied learners are with the services provided. Although not all learners who participated in the study received services from the Thari Programme, those who did were asked to share their level of satisfaction with these services. The data shows that 34.8% of the respondents received services from CYCWs. Among these learners, satisfaction levels were high, with 89% reporting that they were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with the CYCWs' role in their schools. Only one respondent expressed dissatisfaction with the services (see Table 4).

Table 4: Learner satisfaction with the services of the CYCWs

Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Combined	Cumulative percentage
Extremely satisfied	21	44.08		44.68
			89.36	
Satisfied	21	44.68		89.36
Neutral	4	8.51	8.51	97.87
Dissatisfied	1	2.13		100
Extremely dissatisfied	0	0	2.13	
	n = 47			

Tasks that CYCWs Should Do at Schools

Table 5 shows the respondents' responses to the possible tasks of the CYCW at a school. Most respondents identified the role of the CYCW as primarily focused on supporting their educational development, with 77% highlighting this task as their main need. The provision of counselling services followed this. Other duties mentioned included offering support to learners through active listening and providing learners with a space in which to share their problems, promoting sports development, organising awareness

campaigns on social issues, and conducting home visits to better understand their situations.

Table 5: Tasks of the CYCWs at school

Task	Responses (%)
Educational development—support with homework etc.	77.04
Counselling of learners	74.07
Providing support system to learners—someone to talk to	48.89
Sports development	47.41
Doing awareness campaigns on social issues	44.44
Doing home visits and providing feedback to schools	40.74
Helping to ensure a safe school environment	32.59
General support to learners	32.59
Keeping learners safe before and after school	26.67
Supporting parents with parenting skills	25.93
Supporting the school-based support team	20
Cultural development	16.3
Playing games with learners	15.56
Helping learners with a drug addiction	0.74

Psychosocial Development of Learners

Most of the learners asked the programme to help them develop their problem-solving skills (55.6%), followed by help regarding peer pressure (54%), awareness of and dealing with social ills (48.9%), strength development (48%), and reading and writing support (48%).

Table 6: Services that CYCWs should provide at schools

Service that should be provided	Responses (%)
Helping children with how to deal with peer pressure	54.07
Making children aware of social ills and how to deal with them	48.89
Reading and writing support	48.15
Helping children identify and develop their strengths	48.15
Homework support to children	43.7
Improving interpersonal skills	34.81
Helping create a clean school environment	32.59
Teaching computer skills	31.11
Sports development	28.15
Helping children access formal documentation	22.96
Linking children to support services	19.26
Ensuring learners are safe after school	17.78
Food garden	14.81
Developing parenting skills	13.33

Counselling Services Required by Learners

Learner respondents were asked to indicate their need for counselling and to indicate whether they thought other school learners needed it too. As seen in Table 7, 37.78% of the respondents believed that they needed counselling, whereas the same number felt that they did not. Since many learners were unsure (22.22%), it can be argued that the need for therapy in this group is probably higher than the indicated 37.78%. There is also the possibility that some respondents did not want to acknowledge that they needed counselling.

Table 7: Learner respondents' opinion of their own need for counselling

Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
Yes	51	37.78	51	37.78
No	51	37.78	102	75.56
Unsure	30	22.22	132	97.78
No response	3	2.22	135	100

Respondents who indicated that they needed counselling were asked to identify the areas of counselling in which they needed support. As shown in Table 8, most indicated emotional problems (55%), anger management (42%), and family problems (33%). A great cause for concern is that 30% of the respondents indicated they needed support for sexual abuse, which amounts to approximately 24 respondents from this group. Being a victim of sexual abuse is usually more prevalent among females (Maluleke 2018). Considering that 65 (48%) of the respondents were girls, it can be concluded that approximately 37% of this group could have been victims of sexual abuse, which is an exceptionally high percentage.

CYCWs are not trained to deal with or to provide counselling to victims of sexual abuse (South African Council for Social Service Professions 2023). In this case, there is a need for social workers who can intervene through statutory processes and counselling. This shows that although CYCWs can play an essential role in providing social services in schools, there is also a need for social workers.

Table 8: Own therapeutic needs of learner respondents

Respondents' counselling needs (n=81)	
Counselling needs	Responses (%)
Emotional problems	55.55
Anger management	41.98
Family problems	33.33
Poor self-image	29.63
Sexual abuse	29.63
Dealing with traumatic events (loss of a loved one)	22.22
Substance abuse	22.22
Dealing with poverty	20.99
Dealing with bullying	20.99
Dealing with social problems	20.99
Teenage pregnancy	18.52
Conflict with parents	16.05

Interestingly, an overwhelming 84.44% of the respondents felt that there were learners in their schools who required counselling (See Table 9).

Table 9: Learner respondents' opinion on other learners' need for counselling (n=135)

Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
Yes	114	84.44	114	84.44
No	4	2.96	118	87.40
Unsure	16	11.85	134	99.25
No response	1	0.74	135	100

Respondents were also asked to identify areas in which they felt their peers might need counselling services. This question was posed to them on the assumption that by being in close contact with other learners, they would better understand the needs of their peer group than, for instance, the educators.

According to the responses, the primary issues requiring counselling were substance abuse (61%), emotional problems (58%), anger management (55%), social problems (51%), and sexual abuse (45%). All these needs can be supported through the provision of psychosocial services.

Table 10: Counselling needs of other learners in the school

Counselling needs	Responses (%)
Substance abuse	60.77
Emotional problems	57.69
Anger management	55.38
Dealing with social problems	50.77
Sexual abuse	45.38
Family problems	38.46
Teenage pregnancy	36.92
Dealing with traumatic events (e.g., loss of a loved one)	33.85
Dealing with bullying	33.06
Conflict with parents	30
Poor self-image	27.69
Dealing with poverty	24.61
Peer pressure	3.84
Gangs	2.3
School work problems	1.54
Conflict with teachers	0.76

Safe Parks

Safe Parks provide a safe space in the community where recreational, developmental and therapeutic services are rendered to children and youth (Kvalsvig and Taylor 2015; UNICEF South Africa 2017). Because they are more commonly used for primary school learners, secondary school learners were asked whether their schools had Safe Parks. Although they did, albeit informal, only 18% of respondents said yes; 33% were unsure. Most respondents (49%) did not know that their school had a Safe Park (See Table 11).

Table 11: Learners' knowledge of availability of Safe Parks at their secondary schools

Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
Yes	24	17.78	24	17.78
No	66	48.89	90	66.67
Unsure	45	33.33	135 (n)	100

Need for a Safe Park at Secondary Schools

In the questionnaire, it was explained to respondents that a Safe Park provides a safe space in the community for a range of recreational, developmental and therapeutic services for children and youth. Respondents were then asked if they considered Safe Parks necessary. Overwhelmingly, 87% said their schools needed one. A small percentage (10.37) were unsure, and 2.22% felt there was no need for a Safe Park at their school (See Table 12).

Table 12: Need for Safe Parks at schools

Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
Yes	118	87.41	118	87.41
No	3	2.22	121	89.63
Unsure	14	10.37	135 (n)	100

Services Needed by Learners at Safe Parks

The services that learners reported wanting to see included homework supervision and support (72%), counselling (51%), sports development (49%), having a support system so that they have someone to talk to (48%), and educational games (48%).

Table 13: Safe Park services prioritised by learners

Safe Park services prioritised by learners (n=118)	
Services	Responses (%)
Homework supervision and support	72.03
Counselling for learners	50.85
Sports development	49.15
Educational games, e.g. Scrabble and chess	48.31
Support system for learners	48.31
Keeping learners safe before and after school	44.92
Development of reading skills	42.37
Cultural development	34.75
General support to learners	31.36
The development of social skills	27.12
General recreation and socialising opportunities	26.27
Structured holiday programmes	14.41
Entrepreneurship	0.85

Personal Use of Safe Parks, if Available

The results reveal that 62% of respondents would use the available Safe Parks, and 30% indicated that they would use the provided services depending on what was available. Therefore, it can be said that the respondents were optimistic about having Safe Parks at their schools. Given that 30% indicated that their willingness to participate would depend on the available services, it is essential to consider this research and ensure that offered services would benefit learners.

Table 14: Personal use of a Safe Park, if available

Responses	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
Yes	84	62.22	62.22	84
No	1	0.74	62.96	85
Maybe	3	2.22	65.18	88
Depends on the service	41	30.37	95.55	129
No response	6	4.44	100	135

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this research is the small sample size. With a total population of 5 319 learners, the study's representation rate was only 3%, which is considered low. According to Strydom (2021), a sample representing 14% of the population is recommended for a group of 1 000, and a 4.5% representation rate is suggested for a population of 10 000. Based on these guidelines, the representation rate for this study should have been around 8 to 9%. The small sample size may limit the generalisability of the study's findings.

This study was also conducted in a semi-rural community in the Free State province of South Africa, which has unique challenges, such as many parents working far from home, poverty, and other social issues. These specific conditions could create unique needs for learners that might not be present in other communities. As a result, the findings of this study may not be easily extendable or generalisable to other semi-rural or urban communities that might also have Safe Parks at their schools.

To enhance the study's generalisability in future research, it is recommended that the sample size be increased. Including the Isibindi Ezikoleni Model recipients from various areas and provinces would also be beneficial. However, identifying programmes using this model may be challenging due to the current lack of information on where these programmes are being implemented.

Discussion

The first research question sought to determine respondents' experiences with the psychosocial support provided by the Thari Programme. A significant majority (89%) of respondents reported high satisfaction with the services delivered by the CYCWs in schools. These services, supported by social workers, follow the Isibindi Ezikoleni Programme model, which includes tasks such as sports development, learner support, counselling, and educational development (e.g. homework assistance) (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2017; Dunga and Mhlongo 2017). These activities align with the core elements of effective afterschool programmes, which emphasise social and emotional

learning, mentorship by caring adults, and creating an inclusive, supportive learning environment (Afterschool Alliance n.d.). Overall, the Isibindi Ezikoleni Programme effectively addresses learners' needs, though the high demand for counselling services is very prominent. Additionally, the significant need for educational support suggests that many learners struggle with schoolwork, especially because many lack parental assistance (SAHRC and UNICEF 2014).

When examining the developmental support needs of respondents, it is noteworthy that many are related to life skills development. Life skills encompass personal and social abilities that help individuals interact effectively with themselves and others, including problem-solving, creative thinking, adaptive interpersonal behaviours, empathy, emotional regulation, and self-awareness (Lolaty et al. 2012). The data indicates that learners need to develop these critical life skills and may use the Thari Programme to achieve this.

Furthermore, the respondents emphasised the need for support in basic academic skills, including homework, reading, and writing. Alarmingly, 48% of secondary school learners reported needing assistance in these fundamental areas. According to Statistics South Africa (SSA 2022), nearly 30% of 18-year-old learners and 46.3% of 19-year-olds would have dropped out of school. The Department of Basic Education (DBE 2013) has acknowledged that poor-quality education contributes to this high dropout rate, as many learners are left without essential skills like reading, writing, and numeracy. These foundational skills are critical for future academic success, and the DBE has noted that learners leaving the foundation phase often perform below international standards, highlighting the urgent need for additional support.

Using CYCWs to assist with literacy development was not an intervention identified in a study by Meiklejohn et al. (2021), which reviewed literacy interventions in South African primary schools. Instead, caregivers were seen as key contributors. However, due to various challenges, including the unavailability and possible low literacy levels of some parents and caregivers, their involvement may not significantly impact literacy levels. Training CYCWs to improve literacy and support educators' efforts outside school hours could potentially raise literacy levels among learners.

The study also highlighted a strong demand for counselling services. The types of counselling needed suggest that professionals, such as social workers, CYCWs (at a professional level), and psychologists are required to meet these needs, underscoring the importance of social services in schools. Educators are not trained to provide counselling and cannot adequately address these issues.

Apart from substance abuse, there is a significant overlap between the needs of individual respondents and those of their peer group, particularly in dealing with emotional issues and anger management. This is consistent with previous findings indicating that anger is a prevalent problem in schools (Reyneke 2024b). The demand

for substance abuse services among learners also points to underlying factors contributing to this issue. The role of ACEs in substance abuse should be considered (Hunt, Slack, and Berger 2017). The combination of poverty and ACEs indicates that these learners are not only dealing with economic hardship but may also face emotional and psychological challenges that increase their vulnerability to substance abuse (CDC Foundation 2022). This aligns with the theory that high-risk substance use among adolescents is influenced by mental health issues, childhood trauma, poor parental supervision, low academic achievement, and a lack of school connectedness (CDC Foundation 2022). These findings emphasise the need for comprehensive programmes that address the multiple factors contributing to substance abuse, including poverty and the impact of ACEs.

The high need for counselling related to sexual abuse, social problems, anger management, and emotional issues further underscores the importance of providing social services in schools, especially since research has shown that social services in schools contribute to safer school environments and reduce classroom aggression (Reyneke 2024a).

Interestingly, respondents did not perceive gangsterism as a serious problem, which is a positive sign. Gangsterism was one of the primary issues that the Thari Programme aimed to address (Adopt-a-School Foundation 2021). This feedback suggests that the programme might indeed have effectively addressed some of the issues it was designed to combat, and that the psychosocial services provided align well with learners' needs.

The second research question explored the services that secondary school learners believe should be offered at Safe Parks. A large majority (87%) of respondents indicated a need for Safe Parks at their schools. The services they would like to see at these parks, such as sports development, counselling, and educational support, align with earlier tasks identified for the CYCWs in schools. Educational games, which support problem-solving, concentration, and social interaction, could be prioritised to help support learners' educational needs (Radar 2023; Stanborough 2023).

Sixty-two per cent of respondents indicated that they would use the Safe Parks, with an additional 30% indicating that they would make use of the services depending on the content of the programmes. This suggests that participants are selective about which services they engage with, highlighting the importance of regularly monitoring their needs and adapting programmes to motivate their use. It can be concluded that the services provided at Safe Parks generally align with respondents' needs, and the effective implementation of these programmes by CYCWs, who have shown competence within the Thari Programme, is crucial.

It is recommended that the presence of Safe Parks be better marketed, as many respondents were unaware of their availability. Additionally, establishing formal Safe Parks would increase their visibility and usage. Given the confirmed need for social

services in schools, the DBE should consider employing a larger number of social service professionals, especially in quintile 1–3 schools with a higher likelihood of mental health issues and a greater demand for psychosocial services.

Conclusion

The study explored the effectiveness of the Thari Programme in providing psychosocial support to secondary school learners, highlighting a high level of satisfaction among respondents. The programme, delivered primarily by CYCWs with the support of social workers, successfully addressed various learner needs. The results show that CYCWs are contributing to the psychosocial development of learners and that there is also a high demand for counselling to address emotional issues, anger management, substance abuse, and to provide educational support. The services provided at the Safe Parks also seem to be addressing the needs of learners.

The findings underscore the importance of comprehensive support programmes that address immediate educational and emotional needs and broader social issues like poverty and adverse childhood experiences. The demand for Safe Parks further emphasises the need for accessible, supportive environments where learners can receive additional educational and emotional support. However, the study's small sample size and specific semi-rural context may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should aim to include a larger, more diverse sample to enhance the applicability of the results. Additionally, increased visibility and promotion of Safe Parks and the employment of more social service professionals in schools, especially in disadvantaged areas, is recommended to ensure these essential services reach all who need them.

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