

Lack of Social Support in South African Schools

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In many public schools across South Africa, learners face more than just the challenges of schoolwork.

It is common for learners to encounter bullying, poverty, abuse, grief, and mental health difficulties. However, the systems that should support them are often absent. Without counsellors, social workers, or safe places to express themselves, these problems affect their ability to learn and succeed.

The problem is especially severe in under-resourced schools, especially in townships like Eldorado Park.

Former model C and private schools have full-time psychologists or wellness staff, but many public schools lack this support entirely. In Gauteng, according to a recent report from the Daily Maverick, the ratio is about one social worker for every five to ten schools. How can one social worker help thousands of learners?

A teacher at a school in Eldorado Park highlighted the daily impact: "Teachers deal with many different personalities.

Learners come from varied backgrounds, including troubled ones. In my community, there are over 800 learners in a school with just one social worker who visits once a week. This worker is expected to see all these children. As a result, teachers often step in to take on the role. It causes both mental strain and takes away valuable time that could be spent on teaching. We are not equipped to handle most issues, and many of these learners come from families that are not interested in their education. This results in unresolved problems."

It feels like two different worlds.

A high school learner from a model C school said: "Our school has a counsellor, but most students don't use them much because they fear the information won't stay confidential or that parents might get involved. I think high school learners tend to suffer in silence rather than seek help or guidance because they don't feel comfortable or confident enough to trust counsellors with their personal experiences."

Public school students face a different reality.

A learner from a school in Eldorado Park said: "We don't have a counsellor or a psychologist, although I think if we had either, learners would use them. Learners go through a lot at home, and for some, school is their safe space. They would use it for mental health, anxiety, and other issues."

So, model C school pupils have the space but are afraid to use it.

Public school pupils want to use it, but there's no door.

The students who struggle the most often deal with hunger, domestic violence, bullying, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, or conditions like anxiety and depression.

Teachers also suffer because they often must act as untrained counsellors, social workers, and parents. These responsibilities should be handled by qualified school social workers and psychologists.

In Eldorado Park, NPOs such as Khayaalethu, Masibambisane, and P.U.S.H. do provide support, but they primarily focus on orphaned and vulnerable children. Their resources are limited, so they cannot assist every learner who needs support. Without proper support in school, quietness fills the classroom. A learner experiencing trauma has no counsellor and is told to "be strong" and return to class. Issues like abuse or learning barriers are only addressed once a child fails or gets suspended.

A social worker at the crisis centre in Eldorado Park SAPS explained the consequences: "When cases do eventually arrive for social work support, they are usually more complex due to unresolved issues.

Caseloads may become extremely overwhelming, leading to burnout for the worker who eventually handles the cases. Lack of social support effectively breaks down the support system such that after successful intervention, a child often returns to a society where school lacks support and starts functioning as a primary source of crisis referrals."

Why is support missing?

A few key reasons stand out. Budget constraints mean support staff are not prioritised over subjects like mathematics and science, so vacancies remain unfilled. The Department of Basic Education's SIAS policy looks good on paper but fails in practice because there is no one to implement it. Mental health is still seen as taboo in many communities, so counselling is not demanded or funded. With 40 to 60 learners in a class, teachers often can't identify who is emotionally struggling. Even where support is available, trust is broken. Where support is absent, the need is desperate. Counsellors need to earn trust, by establishing clear rules on confidentiality, avoiding forced parent calls, and letting learners speak first.

We cannot keep expecting children to solve for x when they are worried about their next meal or their safety at home.

Until the education system treats social support as essential, we will continue to lose learners to suicide, dropping out, depression, and violence. Investing in social support is not a luxury, it is the foundation of learning.

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