

The state of school social work practice in the Gauteng Province: An exploration and analysis of practice experiences and education and training needs

by

Gift Khumalo

Student Number: 223137200

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Supervisors

Dr. Nolwazi Ngcobo

Prof. Mbongeni Sithole

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DECLARATION

I, Mr. Gift Khumalo, declare that:

1. I am aware of and understand that plagiarism is wrong.
2. The research report is my work; any information derived from the work of others has been acknowledged in the body of the thesis, and a list of references is provided.
3. This thesis has not been submitted for assessment purposes at any other university

Signed:



Date: 28 May 2025

As the candidate's supervisors, we approve the submission of this thesis

Signed:



Name: Dr. Nolwazi Ngcobo

Date: 28 May 2025

Signed:



Name: Prof. Mbongeni Sithole

Date: 28 May 2025

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to all school-based social workers and social workers employed by the national and provincial education and social services departments to provide services and support learners, their parents and school systems. I hope this work signifies your roles in South African schools, and may your invaluable contributions and efforts continue to enhance learners' psychosocial well-being experiences.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DSD: Department of Social Development

GDE: Gauteng Department of Education

MOU: Memorandum of Understanding

SIAS policy: Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support policy

ISHP: Integrated School Health Policy

GP: Gauteng Province

SACSSP: South African Council for Social Services Profession

NASW: National Association of Social Workers

NASW-SA: National Association of Social Workers in South Africa

NACOSSWEP: National Committee for School Social Work Education and Practice

SBST: School-Based Support Team

DBST: District-Based Support Team

LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual+

ABSTRACT

School social work is crucial for the overall well-being of learners, including their psychological, social, and emotional health, as well as their academic success. The study aimed to explore the current state of school social work practice in South Africa's Gauteng province, with particular attention to the professional roles of school social workers, national and provincial policies and documents that inform the practice, and the contextual factors that influence school social workers' practice, and the education and training needs of school social workers. Guided by Social Constructionism Theory and Critical Social Theory, this study used an exploratory qualitative approach, situated within the interpretive paradigm. Data were collected through interviews with 22 social workers (school social workers, supervisors, and school social work programme managers), and through a document review using the READ approach. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed the practice roles of school social work at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, providing one-on-one support interventions, family interventions, and group work with learners, teachers, and school administrators. Contextually, school social work in the province was supported and perceived as vital, with social workers and the overall practice being well-received. However, the practice faces significant barriers, including administrative and staffing challenges, role confusion among school personnel regarding the functions of social workers, and difficulties with interprofessional collaboration. While most practitioners held certifications in school social work practice, there was a strong call for continuous specialized training, particularly in addressing evolving issues like mental health, and emphasized the importance of prior social work experience before school placement. Through these findings, the study recommends practice guidelines and operational strategies for effective school social work practice and proposes relevant ongoing training for school social workers.

Keywords: school social work, psychosocial support, South Africa, practice guidelines

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“The schoolyards contend with bullying, stabbings, drug and alcohol abuse, and violent confrontations, leaving everyone frustrated by the widening chasm between our ideal vision of safe learning environments and the grim crime within our educational institutions.”

Unfortunately, the above narration depicts the unsettling realities of the educational context faced by many learners in South African schools, as described by Riah Phiyega, the CEO of Safer South Africa Foundation and former National Police Commissioner (Phiyega, 2024). In light of these realities, there is a promising development as schools and national and provincial departments have started to increase the employment of school social workers or social workers to service schools. Their work is aligned with the need to create school environments where children can learn and grow with minimum learning barriers or exposure to psychosocial issues likely to be experienced at school, home and in their community environments.

Throughout the history of social work services in educational settings, international and local prominent scholars, such as Marion Huxtable, Michael Kelly, Marelize Vergottini, and Mike Weyers, have advocated for the need and significance of the practice of school social work. Globally, school social work has been embraced by over 50 countries (Huxtable, 2022). These numbers are continuously growing as the need for the placement of school social workers becomes pressingly significant to ensure that learners and schools experiencing learning barriers are effectively supported.

Although school social work has not been fully established as a central component across different education systems in the South African context, the deployment of school social workers is gradually increasing. Vergottini and Weyers (2020) noted that the roots of South African school social work may be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s, with formal recognition in the education system in the 1980s. They contend that the appointment of school social workers has not been consistent across different countries' provinces. Therefore, school social work services are unevenly spread in the country and within provinces. This is also argued by Kemp (2014), who observed that school social workers' presence is still lacking, as some educational provincial departments have either failed to use school social workers or have only hired a few.

Although schools are traditionally known to be spaces for the educational curricula, where teaching and learning occur, Huxtable (2022) asserted that social work has significant contributions to make to schools. This is echoed by other scholars such as Constable (2016) and Finigan-Carr and Shaia (2018), who believe that school social workers deliver essential services that significantly contribute to the overall well-being of learners in terms of their development. This, in turn, improves the learners' psychological, social, and emotional health and academic performance.

These services improve the academic accomplishments of children and adolescents by providing them with the necessary aid and resources. Thompson et al. (2018) assert that school social workers offer direct services to children and their families, helping them address any issues preventing them from achieving their full potential. Mashau et al. (2008) explain that the provision of school social support services serves the purpose of lessening and eradicating learning and developmental barriers experienced by learners, and they also ensure the prevention of such obstacles. In addition, Sosa (2019) noted that school social workers also provide a vital link between the school and the community, helping to create a strong network of support and resources for children and their families.

Based on the overall responsibilities and functions of school social workers, it is evident that they are needed in school environments. They have a practical role to fulfil, and their immediate service users are learners or school-going children. The South African learner profile indicates they are exposed to complex and interconnected personal and contextual issues. The issues spanned the learners' educational settings and home environments, encompassing social challenges (e.g., poverty, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, school-related violence/crime, gambling), academic difficulties (e.g., underachievement, ineffective study habits, poor time management, school dropout), and emotional and psychological obstacles (e.g., mental health disorders, feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety) (Davids & Waghid, 2016; Khumalo, 2023; Ngunyulu et al., 2016; Mahlangu et al., 2021; Ajaero et al., 2018; Zastrow et al., 2019).

In responding to these complex psychosocial issues, school social workers might experience institutional and structural problems that affect their roles. For instance, Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2017) noted that school teachers and administrators had mixed perceptions around the role of school social workers and their services, affecting the successful social workers' intervention services. Higy et al. (2012) argue that school administrators undervalue social work services because of the practice's role ambiguity within the educational context.

Other studies (Binks et al., 2024; Da Luz Scherf, 2024; Murphy et al., 2024), report several challenges to the school social work practice, including a lack of practice guidelines, absence of professional practice models, inadequate deployment of school social workers, insufficient of service delivery infrastructure and being treated as a practice of secondary importance in the school setting. Similarly, South Africa reports similar challenges, with evidence (Kemp, 2014) noting that there is an absence of national standardised guidelines for school social work practice. Van Sittert and Wilson (2018) and Vergottini and Weyers (2020) contend that there is no uniformity in their roles in the different contexts they practice in (i.e., schools, educational districts, provincial and national education departments). Pretorius (2020) adds that discrepancies and inconsistencies exist in models, approaches, methods, philosophies, and working styles.

Contrary to other contexts (i.e., mainly in regions of the Western world) where school social work has been established as a social work specialisation field, South Africa has yet to realise and formalise this. The formalisation of the practice as a specialisation will bring about uniform standardised guidelines. The National Committee on School Social Work Education and Practice (NACOSSWEP) (2015), an advocacy for social work services in schools established in 2015 by the National Association for Social Work of South Africa, applied to the South African Council for Social Services Profession (SACSSP) for school social work as a practice area. The ultimate goal of this committee was to focus on school social work specialisation, education and knowledge development, as well as on the development of practice models, practice standards and programmes.

To date, although the number of school social workers has increased in the South African context, the responsibilities of these practitioners remain unstandardised (Vergottini 2019). In 2019, the Professional Board of Social Work at the SACSSP approved the regulations for specialisation in school social work. In 2020, a draft regulation was issued by the Department of Social Development, South Africa, detailing the requirements and conditions for registration of specialities in social work, including school social work, under the Social Service Professions Act, 1978 (Act No. 110 of 1978). As of the latest available information, the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP, 2024) has not yet published final regulations for the specialisation in school social work and noted that the specialisation was still under consideration and the final regulations will be in place once approved by the Minister of Social Development.

Moreover, across South Africa, there are inconsistencies in the professional titles used to refer to school social workers. Depending on the region or institution, they may be identified as ‘school

social workers’, ‘senior education specialists’, or ‘socio-pedagogue’. The deployment of school social workers in the Gauteng province has taken a different shift compared to other provinces, such as the Western Cape and Free State, which often have school social workers employed within education departments.

In the Gauteng province, school social workers are employed at the Provincial Department of Education as social work supervisors and at special schools as school social workers (E. Smith, personal communication, August 16, 2023). Other categories of school social workers are employed in specific schools and paid by the schools or the SGBs. The Gauteng DSD employs the last category of school social workers under the school social work programme (agreed in the memorandum of understanding by Gauteng DSD and GDE) (S. Madelle, personal communication, August 16, 2023). As such, the Gauteng province presents a unique, complex context.

Vergottini (2019) estimated that GDE had appointed 27 school social workers between 2015 and 2017. Considering the large population of schools and school-going children in the province and the Department of Basic Education’s insufficient budget to employ school social workers, an agreement was reached between the Gauteng Department of Social Development (DSD) and the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). The purpose of this agreement was “to further provide the means through which the Gauteng Department of Social Development and the Gauteng Department of Education will coordinate social work services to the high-risk children and families in managing social issues that impact on learners’ quality of social functioning to be served by the Department of Social Development’s officials” (Gauteng Department of Social Development & the Gauteng Department of Education, 2018). The Gauteng DSD allocated 120 social workers to service these schools under their School Social Work programme (S. Madelle, personal communication, August 16, 2023). With this background in mind, school social work services in the province are provided by different departments/ units: specific schools through SGB appointments, special needs schools through GDE appointments, and high-risk schools through DSD appointments.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RATIONALE

The need for school social work services in South Africa is evident (Pretorius, 2020). In the Gauteng province, school social workers are employed by different entities, including SGBs, GDE, and DSD, as previously stated. This fragmented approach to employment and deployment may create confusion regarding the roles and responsibilities of social workers, which can

potentially hinder the effective delivery of psychosocial services as envisaged by education policies (Lesasa, 2019; Vergottini & Weyers, 2022). For instance, the SGB-appointed social workers are placed in specific schools to attend to those school's particular needs (Vergottini & Weyers, 2022), the GDE social workers are placed at the provincial level to render social work services to all Gauteng schools (Vergottini, 2020), and DSD social workers are placed within their regional offices to support high-risks schools (Lesasa, 2019).

The GDE, as a provincial government department that oversees and regulates basic education in Gauteng, South Africa, with a mandate to ensure that all learners in Gauteng receive quality education and are equipped with the skills and knowledge to succeed in their adult lives (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2013). However, the current fragmented approach to employing and deploying school social workers may impede the GDE's ability to coordinate, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of these services across the province.

Moreover, Gauteng is home to some of the country's most populous cities and areas. It is ranked as one of South Africa's nine provinces, hosting the largest total population of children. The total population of the province is estimated to be approximately 15,81 million, and it is home to the majority of children, with close to 5 million children living in the province (Statistics South Africa, 2021). The province also recorded the highest percentage of school absenteeism at 26,5%, an increase in children who were out-of-school percentage of 17,2% (Statistics South Africa, 2021), horrifying acts of violence such as stabbing and physical bullying incidents (Venketsamy, 2024), and concerning increase in deliveries and termination of pregnancies (TOP) in facilities among girls aged 10 to 19 years old with a total of 24,941 deliveries and TOPs being recorded in facilities across the province during the 2022/23 period (Gauteng Health, 2024). UNICEF (2024) has highlighted that South Africa has considerable issues concerning child welfare. According to statistics, 25% of children aged five to 16 have experienced familial or household violence, 18% have been physically abused, 13% have been emotionally abused, and 12% have been neglected. These issues underscore the urgent need for coordinated and comprehensive school social work services.

Although school social workers address these multifaceted issues, research suggests that their presence in schools remains limited (Haffejee et al., 2023; Kemp, 2014; Khumalo & Pretorius, 2024; Ntombela et al., 2022; Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018; Vergottini & Weyers, 2022). For example, between 2015 and 2017, 27 school social workers were assigned to schools across the province (Vergottini, 2019), which is insufficient to handle significant concerns such as excessive

absenteeism and out-of-school children. Furthermore, studies by Boboyi (2024) and Khumalo and Pretorius (2024) have argued for the employment and institutionalisation of social work services in education settings.

Therefore, this study is uniquely situated within the Gauteng Province to explore the current state of school social work services. Unlike prior studies that have been conducted primarily through master's-level research reports (e.g., Khanyile, 2020; Lesasa, 2022), focusing on advocating for school social work services and the need for school social workers' presence or developing guidelines for specific employment contexts, this research adopts a broader focus to inform practice guidelines and operational guidelines for improving the practice of school social work in the Gauteng province. The research is significant as it contributes to an in-depth understanding of the current professional roles and contributions of school social workers on the province, thereby generating evidence to guide professional practice in schools. This research also has implications of policy development and implementation as national and provincial policies and documents that inform practice are thoroughly examined to clarify the responsibilities of social workers with school-going children and identify gaps that hinder effective practice. Lastly, the research has value for education and training of school social workers in the South African context as it highlights the professional development needs of school social workers and provides a basis for informing professional training initiatives. Overall, this research offers opportunities for future research on school social work within the South African context.

1.3 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AIMS, AND OBJECTIVES

1.3.1 Research questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the practice experiences of school social workers in the Gauteng Province?
2. What contextual factors act as facilitators and barriers to the practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province?
3. What are the current and perceived education and training requirements of school social workers in the Gauteng Province?
4. What practice and operational guidelines can be recommended to improve school social work practice in South Africa?

The development of the above questions, as noted by De Souza et al. (2016), is foregrounded in every research project. The questions were formulated to determine the focus of the research study and helping provide guidance for the entire research process, enhancing the final research product (De Souza et al., 2011). The formulation of the research questions was based on the researcher's curiosity about the state of school social work in the Gauteng Province and in the literature. In addition, suggestions by White (2017) were also considered when formulating the research questions: i) They act as a compass in the research process, ii) They facilitate discussion of the results and conclusions, and iii) They help communication with the scientific community. As such, the subsequent detailed aims and objectives are influenced by the four research questions.

1.3.2 Aim

The primary aim of this study is to explore the current state and practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province, and to identify the education and training needs.

1.3.3 Objectives

The objectives of this study were:

- To explore the practice experiences of school social workers in the Gauteng Province.
- To explore the contextual factors that act as facilitators and barriers to the practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province.
- To understand the current and perceived education and training requirements of school social workers in the Gauteng Province.
- To provide practice and operational guidelines, grounded in the research data, for improving the practice of school social work in South Africa.

1.4 POTENTIAL VALUE OF THE STUDY

The study aims to contribute significantly to the body of knowledge within school social work in South Africa. The study gives a voice to social workers servicing schools to extensively share their experiences of school social work regarding their roles and contextual factors that act as barriers and facilitators to practice and their education and training needs. It is envisaged that the study will contribute to an in-depth understanding of school social work in the province, which will have the potential to strengthen practices within school settings. The information gathered in

this study will influence the possible recommendations of guidelines for applying social work in school settings and the education and training needs of school social workers.

The guidelines will offer strategies on social work services with learners and their parents/guardians, teachers and collaborative possibilities. The study has implications for educational policies and documents that inform school social work practice. Moreover, the study may guide training for school social workers that GDE and DSD may provide. This training may be used for capacity building in which school social workers' skills, abilities, resources, and capabilities within their profession and school settings are developed and strengthened to better serve the learners, teachers, and schools.

1.5 CHAPTER LAYOUT

This study consists of the following chapters:

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter introduced the study's background, problem statement, rationale, and potential value.

Chapter Two: The literature review

This chapter discusses international and local literature on school social work practice.

Chapter Three: The theoretical frameworks: Social constructionism theory & critical social theory

This chapter presents the study's theoretical framework, which are social constructionism theory and critical social theory. The justification and synergy of these theories are discussed in detail

Chapter Four: Research methodology

This chapter illustrates the qualitative research methodology used in the empirical study and the justifications for the research methods such as interpretive paradigm, exploratory research, and procedures followed.

Chapter Five: Review of documents that inform the practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province

This chapter reviews documents that inform school social work practice in Gauteng.

Chapter Six: The roles of school social workers in the Gauteng Province

This chapter presents the empirical findings obtained from the participants and key informants on the roles of school social workers in Gauteng public schools.

Chapter Seven: Contextual factors that act as barriers and facilitators to school social work practice in the Gauteng Province

This chapter covers the findings on the contextual factors that act as barriers and facilitators to school social work practice in Gauteng public schools.

Chapter Eight: Synthesis, conclusion and recommendations

This chapter concludes the study's main findings and outlines the recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

1.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter offered a concise overview of the background pertinent to the current study. The problem statement and rationale emphasised the need for a comprehensive exploration of school social work practice in Gauteng province and the potential significance of the study. Chapter Two analyses global and local literature about school social work and social work services in educational settings.

CHAPTER TWO: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This research study focuses on the field and practice of school social work, particularly the current state and practice in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. The chapter acknowledges that school social work is a growing field across the globe and within the Sub-Saharan African region. The purpose of this literature review chapter is to discuss in-depth existing research and knowledge on the practice of school social work and social work services with school-going children and in education settings. This discussion situates the current study within the broader global, regional, and national contexts. For instance, in a global context, this literature review is built on the work of prominent authors in school social work, such as Marion Huxtable, Michael Kelly, Cynthia Franklin and Paula Allen-Meares. In the sub-Saharan African context, the literature is based on research by Marelize Vergottini, Edmarie Pretorius, and Mike Meyers, amongst other scholars. The first section discusses the historical context of school social work and social services in school environments.

The section consists of the global historical context of practice and then shifts focus to the local South African historical context. The subsequent section provides the overall understanding of school social work practice in detail, covering a description of school social work, roles of school social workers, interventions at learners' homes and their families and the safeguarding of children's rights. The last section explores the school social workers' practice environment and school social work training and education.

2.2 HISTORY OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN THE GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

2.2.1 The evolution of school social work globally

Traditionally, the history and development of school social work can be traced to the early 1900s when school social workers were tasked with providing a link between home and school for learners experiencing barriers to learning or at-risk learners (Allen-Meares et al., 1996). School social workers during these early times were hired in schools with the recognition and understanding of social conditions such as the family system, neighbourhood, community, or the school itself that prevented children from learning and the school from fulfilling its education mandate (Allen-Meares et al., 1996). Several events occurred internationally that contributed to

the history of school social work. In the United Kingdom, the history of school social workers can be traced back to the late 1800s when compulsory school attendance laws were put in place (Huxtable & Blythe, 2002). During this time, school social workers were referred to as attendance officers, and their responsibilities were to ensure learners' compulsory school attendance (Huxtable, 1998). The lack of learners' attendance was attributed to families' financial difficulties and a dearth of appreciation for the benefits of education and social and physical problems. The official title later changed to education welfare officers and social workers (Huxtable & Blythe, 2002).

The United States of America was the first to pioneer and introduce essential school social work services in some states in 1906 (Kelly, 2008). Known as visiting teachers working in community schools in the USA, school social workers supported at-risk learners whose school attendance was affected (Kelly, 2008; Sherman, 2016). Vergottini (2019) explains that the visiting teachers followed social work approaches, and by the 1930s, school social work as a title had been adopted formally.

School social work started to grow in other parts of the world after the 1930s. The 1940s to 1970s marked a significant era for the recognition of school social work in Sweden, Finland, Canada, and Norway, as the first school social workers were appointed by some countries, referring to them as school curators. In the 1960s, Ghana's Education Services Department pioneered the school welfare system to enforce attendance and meet learners' needs (Cudjo et al., 2016; Sossou & Daniels, 2002). In Germany and Hong Kong, school social work is understood to have originated in the 1970s (Leung, 2016), aiming to help secondary school learners cope with the emotional and social challenges they were experiencing. School social services in the United Arab Emirates have been implemented in schools since 1972, and professionals have been tasked with providing a comprehensive range of programs (Huxtable, 2013).

In Malta, Attendance Officers were deployed from around 1946. Still, it was the Education Act of 1974 that called for a shift as the officers were tasked with duties that resonate with school social work (i.e., enforce school attendance, explore reasons for poor attendance and help families and caregivers keep their children in schools) (Pace, 2002). School social work services commenced in Switzerland in the 1980s (Wicki et al., 2020). In the same 1980s era and early 1990s, Vergottini (2019) explains that Korea, Spain and Greece followed with the deployment of school social workers in their regions. Argentina's Buenos Aires Province introduced school social work before 1997 (in the 1960s) in which all primary schools and special needs schools had at least one school

social worker who had a professional social work degree and a primary teaching qualification (Huxtable, 2013; Huxtable & Blyth, 2002; Kemp, 2014). Literature on the history of school social work in the African context is limited, and school-based social work services are either non-existent or rarely provided in some parts of the region (Huxtable, 2022; Khumalo et al., 2024).

2.2.2 The evolution of school social work in South Africa

The history of social work in South Africa is interwoven with the history of colonisation and imperialism. Patel (2005) reported that through colonialism, traditional ways of life and social relations were disrupted and denigrated, and the practice of social work grew from this context. Social welfare in the South African context began with informal initiatives for providing relief for the poor by religious and civic organizations (e.g., the Dutch East India Company and the Dutch Reformed Church) (Patel, 2005). During the apartheid era, social welfare services were established to focus on the 'poor white problems', particularly with the white people, therefore leading to unequal resource allocations (Smith, 2014). A shift occurred between the 1980s and 1990s in social welfare towards human-rights-based approaches and developmental social welfare policies that focus on structural inequalities (Ntebe, 1994). As such, the unjust practices within the South African education system that segregated schools based on race and abilities gave rise to school social work (Du Toit, 1996; Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). The education system has developed and changed over the past decades from its early years, colonial times to apartheid times and the current democratic era (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). During these different eras, many unjust practices affected children with disabilities and vulnerable groups. In the mid- and late 1600s, the first schools by Dutch and other missionaries were pioneered, which segregated white children and 'slave' children (Le Roux, 2011).

In addition, the exclusion of white and coloured children with disabilities from formal education followed, and funding was not allocated to schools for deaf and blind students by the government (Du Toit, 1996). The passing of the Special School Amendment Act in 1937 prioritised white children with disabilities and disregarded children of other races. The apartheid period saw special schools for non-white children being moved from missions/ churches to education departments that solely catered for non-whites. The apartheid era marked a significant period for school social work as 'special teachers' or 'visiting teachers' were deployed to the Transvaal and Natal education departments (Kemp, 2014). The overall role of these teachers was "to address some of the social welfare needs of the school population" (Kemp, 2014, p. 13), and they needed a social worker/ sociology/ psychology qualification plus a teaching qualification. This deployment cemented the

significant role and value that school social workers can play in the education system in South Africa. Kemp (2014) states that service regulatory bodies, professional bodies, and social advocacy agencies noted the need for social work services in different South African Schools during the 1970s.

In 1973, the De Lange Commission "recommended the development of school social work with particular reference to 'children with special needs, guidance and parental involvement'" (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020, p. 126). Literature on the first deployment of school social workers in South Africa is unclear, with various contradictions noted. Swart (1997) notes that the first school social workers were appointed in the KwaZulu-Natal Province in 1983 followed by other provinces. The placement of school social workers did not gain any meaningful pace even after this appointment. Another author, Kemp (2017), reported that in 1987, the first appointment of a school social worker who held only a social work degree and without a teaching degree was made. The beginning of the democratic era (post-1994) initiated the removal of institutional barriers based on race, therefore recognising that all children (regardless of race and abilities) have the right to basic education and equal access to education, as noted in the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution (1996) (McConnachie et al., 2017). Recognising the significant contribution that social workers play in schools and the need for school social work specialisation, the South African Council for Social Services Profession (SACSSP) in 2009 identified the field as a specialisation area (Kemp, 2014). Since then, the deployment of school social workers has gradually grown in the nine different provinces of South Africa, but not significantly.

Kemp (2014), Sibise and Mathebula (2023), and Vergottini (2019) have all stated that the Western Cape Department of Education has been the workforce of school social workers. This is because the Department was the first to recognise school social work practice. Additionally, the Department is currently the largest employer of school social workers, nationally. According to Kemp (2014) and Vergottini (2019), the province of Gauteng, the location of this particular study, employed four school social workers by 2012 and, by 2019, 27 school social workers. Table 1 reflects the number of school social workers deployed in education systems between 2010 and 2017. The significant differences in the deployment of school social workers across the different provinces are due to contextual and socio-economic priorities as per province. Sibise and Mathebula (2023) noted that within the South African provinces, there were differences in how school social work was operationalised, affecting the practice's significance and growth.

Table 1: Number of school social workers in education systems per province in South Africa

	2010-2012 (Kemp, 2014)	2015-2017 (Vergottini, 2019)
Gauteng	4	27
Free State	4	32
KZN	11	14
Northern Cape	3	4
North-West	1	2
Western Cape	46	166
Eastern Cape	0	46
Limpopo	0	180 (<i>appointed as learner support advisors on temporary contracts</i>)
Mpumalanga	0	4
TOTALS	69 School Social Workers	475 School Social Workers

2.3 UNDERSTANDING THE PRACTICE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

2.3.1 Social work and school social work

Social work strives to help individuals face personal challenges and promote positive change for communities. According to the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) (2024), social work is a practice-oriented and academic field that advocates for social change and development, fosters social cohesiveness, and facilitates the empowerment and emancipation of individuals. Social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and tolerance for diversity are fundamental to social work. This definition implies that, at its core, social work is a profession dedicated to empowering individuals and communities. Social workers address personal challenges, health issues, and relationship problems while advocating for broader social change. Social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity are central to social work. Social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being while focusing on creating positive change for entire communities.

On the other hand, the concept of school social work lacks a universally agreed-upon definition. Interestingly, several studies highlight the context-dependent nature of these definitions as the terms “school social work”, “school-based social work”, and “social work in schools” are often used interchangeably. Much of the literature (e.g., Franklin et al., 2008; Huxtable, 2022; Kemp, 2015) recognise school social work as a specialised area within the broader social work profession. According to a definition provided by Kemp et al. (2015), school social work is a practice-based profession in educational institutions to address the social, emotional, and behavioural challenges to learning that learners encounter. Furthering the position of school social work being a specialisation,

Franklin et al. (2008) state that it is a social work area that attempts to assist learners’ learning and socio-emotional adjustment through direct service, service coordination, and advocacy in the academic context. Constable (2016, p. 3) posits that it is a specialised practice area, and the ultimate goal of the practice is “to provide a setting for teaching, learning, and for the attainment of competence and confidence.” Da Luz Scherf (2021) puts forth that school social work is simply the practice of social work in schools. Additionally, the National Association of Social Work (1995) and Vergottini (2019) explain that school social work applies principles and methods within an education system to provide holistic, supportive social work services to learners, parents, teachers, and the school community.

This definition is further supported by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2012), which elaborates on the definition, noting that school social workers act as a vital link, working directly with learners, families, and administrators. Their contributions include shaping school discipline policies, intervening in mental health concerns, managing crises, and providing essential support services. Specific roles, duties, and responsibilities of school social workers are outlined in the subsequent section.

2.3.2 Overall roles of school social workers in the global context

School social workers support learners and help schools respond to their social needs and problems (Reyneke, 2020). Globally, the roles and responsibilities of school social workers are fulfilled in different settings. For instance, the United States, Sweden, and Finland have school social workers who form part of the school’s multidisciplinary team, which comprises staff and practitioners (Andersson et al., 2002). In Germany, school social work services are provided in collaboration between youth welfare organisations and the education system (Beck, 2017). Chiu and Wong (2002) state that Hong Kong has school social workers who provide services through

NGOs. In Zimbabwe, though there is a shortage of school social workers, their roles include but are not limited to conducting social assessments, individual, group and family counselling, crisis intervention, community liaison and projects, contributing and influencing school policies, home visits and follow-up, linking and referring to social services (welfare, housing, health, education), lifestyle issues and life skills, career guidance and mentorship (Chigondo, 2019).

In some contexts, school social workers may be employed at a district level by enhancing collaboration between the home, school and community environment and ensuring that the districts can meet their academic mission (Tan & Frey, 2025). School social workers are responsible for supporting learners in developing their social, emotional and intellectual abilities during their developmental stages (Maundeni & Ntseane, 2004).

Their role includes confronting learners' social issues as they interact in their home, school, and community environments (Maundeni & Ntseane, 2004). School social workers' responsibilities are broadened to encompass issues such as school attendance and absenteeism, sexual orientation and substance abuse, and learners' behavioural problems (Agresta, 2004; Kelly et al., 2015). They are also responsible for addressing issues that may arise from the home environment, such as child abuse and neglect, child maltreatment, abuse, or neglect (Kelly et al., 2015).

In collaboration with teachers, school social workers have the potential to influence a positive school ethos, reduce risks or barriers to learning and increase resilience in learners. School social workers promote nurturing interactions between the learners and their different systems (i.e., individual self, family, school, community) (Thompson et al., 2018). This is done by providing skills training, responding to the crisis that arises, and through parent training.

2.3.3 The roles of school social workers in the South African context

As indicated previously, school social work practice in the African context has not been explored in depth. As such, with the limited literature, school social workers and social workers supporting schools and learners perform somewhat similar roles to those from the global context. As part of the researcher's PhD investigation, he conducted a scoping review on the roles and responsibilities of school social workers within the African context, which was published independently (Khumalo et al., 2024). This scoping review offered substantial insights into social workers' different roles and responsibilities in school settings. Relevant findings from the research included South African studies (Haffejee et al., 2023; Ntombela et al., 2022; Ogina & Ramare, 2019; Schmidt, 2018; Smith, 2016; Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018; Vergottini & Weyers, 2022) are

summarised in below discussions and reflect that school social workers held the following roles, namely: providing psychosocial support to learners and their families, facilitating group support sessions, training and guiding teachers to support learners, developing preventative programmes, and forming partnerships with other professionals and organisations.

Most of the South African studies included in the review concluded that school social workers provided individualised psychosocial support (i.e., therapy and counselling) services as learners were exposed to many issues and often did not have any non-academic support within school settings (Bulanda & Jalloh, 2019; Haffejee et al., 2023; Ntombela et al., 2022; Smith, 2016; Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018). Specifically, the school social workers would visit schools to identify and support learners challenged with social issues such as child abuse, domestic abuse, parental neglect, extreme poverty, suicide and stress-related mental health problems. Once the therapy and counselling were provided and it was found that the learners needed further specialised support, the school social workers would refer to other services such as psychologists, and remedial practitioners, schools for the blind, deaf schools, mental health rehabilitation, optometrists for eye tests and occupational therapists.

The psychosocial support services are extended to the parents and families of the learners through school social workers facilitating parents' evenings on parental guidance programmes, conducting home visits and providing a platform for the parents to share their experiences and ways in which they could be enhanced. In cases where issues related to the socio-economic standing of the child and the child's orphan-ness were noted within the South African context, school social workers assisted them in applying for childbirth certificates and child support grants. According to Schmidt (2018), this would ensure that learners don't drop out because of the lack of financial means at school and at home. Moreover, school social workers provided and facilitated group work services for learners who knew little about social functioning, social skills, and life skills development, which could assist them. Topics related to anger management, self-esteem, teenage pregnancy and social skills.

School social workers support teachers in identifying learners' social problems and learning barriers and ultimately improve learners' well-being in schools (Schmidt, 2018; Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018; Vergottini & Weyers, 2022). Practitioners were responsible for empowering teachers with the knowledge and information needed to support learners, ensuring that they acted in the best interest of the learners. A part of the topics for the teacher training included information related to the curriculum (e.g., bullying, violence), policy, legislation, and statutory matters. The

study further revealed that school social workers believed they were responsible for teachers' development in understanding the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy.

School social work in South Africa addresses societal issues in schools by developing preventative programmes. These programmes can be implemented as part of professional community work, reaching all learners and the entire school. South African studies highlight the responsibility of school social workers in developing anti-bullying, discipline, substance abuse, gangsterism, and drug use programmes (Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018). Such programmes are argued for considering the prevalence of violence in schools, such as bullying and the use of corporal punishment as discipline in South African schools (Chauke, 2021; Lumadi, 2024). As such, school social workers are ideal professional to help learners understand bullying as unhealthy and help teachers reconstruct their knowledge and understanding of child discipline in education systems. Moreover, Smith's (2012) study suggests that school social workers should initiate these programmes after student placement, providing learners insight into social issues and becoming social change agents. Schmidt (2018) indicates that conducting preventative programmes can help make behavioural changes among learners, particularly in cases of violence.

Lastly, the review showed that school social workers (e.g., Haffeejee et al., 2023; Ntombela et al., 2022; Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018) often partner with other professionals and community stakeholders to provide effective school services. They collaborate with teachers, the community, and school principals to ensure student attendance and address concerns. School social workers also participate in MDT committees or caucus teams, discussing issues and learner cases.

It is worth noting that social work practitioners, though they may not always be referred to as school social workers, are employed within the national Department of Basic Education and some of the national, provincial and district departments of basic education. The roles and functions of these practitioners in these departments are best described by Kemp (2014) and Vergottini (2019), whose PhD was focused on this topic within the Free State and Western Cape provinces.

At the provincial level, social workers manage district social workers, coordinate school services, organise seminars, and screen programmes. They also act as a liaison between systems. At the national level, they create policies and strategies and monitor evaluations. They directly support learners, parents, caregivers, educators, and school-based support teams. Other tasks include screening, project development, supportive infrastructure development, networking, and updating policies (Vergottini & Weyers, 2022). Kemp (2014, p. 30) concluded that school social workers

appointed to service schools by the Department of Education at a provincial or school governing body level fulfil the following roles: 1) identifying learners who need support; 2) assessing their needs and problems; 3) interpreting these needs and problems to school staff, learners, parents and other role players; 4) providing direct and indirect services; 5) providing consultation, collaboration and coordination; 6) promoting parental involvement; 7) promoting community involvement; 8) liaising with resources; 9) developing inter-professional teams; and 10) developing a proper administrative system. Lesesa (2022), whose Master's study focused on this topic within the Gauteng province with school social workers in high-risk schools, concluded that practitioners 1) rendered psychosocial support services, 2) conducted assessments on children, 3) supported learners who have barriers to learning, 4) offered early intervention and prevention programmes in high-risk schools, 6) and fulfilled other multiple roles. While it is commendable that such studies have been conducted, the first two were context-specific, with school social workers functioning within the provincial and district levels of Free State and Western Cape. Although located within Gauteng, the last study only focused on school social workers servicing high-risk schools.

Similarly, a pilot study by Khumalo and Pretorius (2024) found that social work services in schools included 1) consultation with teachers first to understand adolescent psychosocial issues, 2) conducting assessments with adolescents to explore their challenges, and 3) providing direct short-term intervention to adolescents and referring to appropriate service providers.

In light of these studies that have, to some degree, bridged the gap in the practice of school social work in the South African context, a clear gap exists in the comprehensive examination of school social work within the Gauteng province, focused on all school social work services in the public schools (i.e., those employed by DSD, GDE and SGBs), and on the overall practice beyond just understanding the roles and responsibilities of practitioners. This comprehensive examination should also critically explore the contextual factors within which school social workers function.

In other non-empirical studies, the literature argues that school social workers in the South African context have a pressing role to play in the education system. For instance, Pretorius (2020) argued that based on South African contextual issues that affect learners in schools, school social workers would address social, emotional and behavioural barriers to learning; practitioners ensure that learning and development take place through early identification of the psychosocial obstacles and appropriate intervention, and assessment can be made, and learners in need of protection,

remedial assistance, rehabilitation and restoration can be referred to organisations specialising in the particular services.

In addition to providing psychosocial support services, Boboyi (2024) argued that parental involvement in schools and learner education was imperative, and school social workers are in a better position to develop parenting programmes that will equip parents to do parenting effectively. Reyneke (2018) argued that school social workers could help enhance teachers' understanding of the child's social context, provide preventative and early intervention social work services, support learners with behavioural problems and assist their parents and caregivers.

2.3.4 Intervention services in school-going children's home environments

School social workers are instrumental in supporting learners and their families through hardships that they experience that affect the overall well-being of learners. As part of this support to learners and their families, school social workers conduct home visits across different countries (Barboza et al., 2021; Brook et al., 2012; Openshaw, 2008; Winter & Cree, 2015). Home visits to support learners and their families are responsive and tailored to parents' and home needs (Brook et al., 2012). In their explanation of home visits in social work, Winter and Cree (2015) do not limit the approach to school social workers but generally to social workers working with children and families. They explain that home visits are at the heart of social work practice and do not comprise a single visit but continuous visits in which assessments are made daily about the children's risk, protection and welfare. The history of social workers providing home visits dates back to the beginning times of industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as concerns about the administration of poverty relief systems (e.g., the UK) (Winter & Cree, 2016). The home visit is a key site for assessment across child welfare systems and has been described as social work's 'totem technique' (Reisch & Margolin, 1998).

Home visits usually follow on consultation with school officials or reports by teachers requesting school social work support. There are many reasons why school social workers may be probed to support learners and conduct home visits. Allen and Tracy (2004) and Ochocki et al. (2024) explain that home visits may be conducted when a learner is suspected of being abused or neglected at home. School social workers may also conduct home visits when learners misbehave or have prolonged absences. Much literature has been produced on the role of social workers in this regard. For instance, Cook (2019) outlines that during home visits, social workers are tasked with making assessments of risk and need and investigating emotive issues, such as abuse and neglect. Openshaw (2008) expands on this, stating that the role is to visit the home to assess the

situation and give information back to the school officials. Additionally, the visit may be because the school social worker wants to involve the parents or guardians in the child's progress and in activities that reinforce programmes and behaviour management that have been put together for the child by themselves and the school officials.

Attention also needs to be drawn to the benefits of home visits, as Barboza et al. (2021) highlight that home visits improve learners' overall health and development. Social workers have faced many challenges when conducting home visits, especially when communities and households are in unfavourable conditions. Lyter and Abbott (2000) and Kim and Hopkins (2017) put forward that the world is becoming dangerous and violent, and social workers, in most cases, are visiting homes and communities confronted with violence. These experiences threaten the capacity of social workers to conduct home visits to children's homes. In some contexts, social workers have encountered physical threats (Jayaratne et al., 2004), verbal abuse, and sexual abuse (Kim & Hopkins, 2017). Community characteristics also play a role in the exposure to violence experienced by social workers.

Lyter and Abbott (2000) outlined social workers' varying home visit roles. In their writing, they identify the following: 1) The frightened/ avoidant type, one who experiences significant anxiety regarding potential risks during home visits and often either skips visits altogether or rushes through them to alleviate their apprehensions; 2) The clueless type, someone who appears disinterested, avoids discussing safety policies and practices, and moves about with little regard for precautions, only becoming concerned after there is an incident occurs in which they or a colleague is implicated; 3) The naive and compassionate type, who believe that their compassion will be recognised by all, possibly providing them with a protective shield or accepting risk as an inevitable part of serving humanity; 4) The brash type, one who boasts about their fearlessness and perceives themselves as invulnerable in any situation; 5) The well-informed type, who strives to stay knowledgeable about potential risks and consistently follows safe social work practices. These home visit roles are significant to outline as it may be argued that due to the nature of social work and specifically school social work, practitioners are exposed to different home circumstances that may affect their practice during the visits. This makes them vulnerable.

Pretorius and Herbst (2022) explain that in the context of South African social work settings, client violence is common. This violence includes clients' acts of verbal abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, property damage and sexual abuse towards practitioners (Pretorius, 2020; Pretorius & Herbst, 2022). Similar to the home visit roles outlined by Lyter and Abbott (2000),

Pretorius and Herbst (2022) highlight that South African social workers often experience physical and psychological consequences, such as headaches, muscle aches, and stomach ulcers, following incidents of client violence. The frequency of these violent encounters can desensitise social workers, leading them to minimise the severity of such incidents. Coupled with a perceived lack of support, social workers may come to view client violence as an inherent part of their job, underestimating its impact on their personal and professional well-being. In an ideal world, school social workers would fulfil these roles with limited difficulties, but that is not the case, as evidenced in this section. The subsequent section draws attention to challenges experienced by school social workers concerning their roles and responsibilities.

2.3.5 Ambiguous roles and responsibilities of school social work

Much of the literature on school social work has been vastly focused on the significant contribution of the profession in school settings, therefore neglecting the challenges that may influence the performance and the quality of services provided by school social workers (Alotaibi et al., 2020). Specifically, the significant contribution is advocated for because the role of school social workers is multifaceted and essential for addressing the complex needs of learners.

However, their diverse responsibilities and marginalisation within the educational system contribute to ambiguity of their roles. Literature from both global and local contexts has extensively documented this ambiguity surrounding the tasks and responsibilities of school social workers and the broader professional practice (Bolin et al., 2017; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2017; Reyneke, 2020). Based on this literature, it may be argued that because school social work is a relatively new social work practice in many contexts, the practice often lacks clear boundaries regarding what practitioners can and cannot do, contributing to this ambiguity. This also depends on the geo-social context, such as country, location, and rural versus urban area of the practice.

For instance, Bolin et al. (2017) put forth that school social workers are particularly exceptional in delivering thorough, positive services related to sexuality to children with disabilities due to their understanding of the child in the context of their environment, their extensive knowledge of human development, and their appreciation for human relationships. However, in their findings, they concluded that the school social workers were uncertain about their role in providing sexual education to children with disabilities. The school social workers deferred the responsibility of providing sexual education support to educational nurses, teachers, counsellors, and medical providers, indicating that they did not believe that offering such support was part of their professional mandate.

Other professionals working in the school setting may also lack an understanding of school social work and may be uncertain about their significant contribution to the school system. This is evident in the study by Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2017), which found that other school professionals had mixed perceptions about the role of school social workers. This affected how school social work services are understood and valued by non-social work professionals in the school. Bye et al. (2009) and Higy et al. (2012) add that due to the ambiguity of understanding the role of school social workers, school administrators have been reported to undervalue school social workers, hold varying opinions of what school social workers could and should do and often conclude that their role concerns the outcomes in attendance and discipline.

While this role related to ensuring attendance and intervening in discipline matters is reflected as part of the critical roles in school social work (Bulanda & Jalloh, 2019), practitioners' roles should not be reduced to this as they have more to contribute to the schools. Balli (2016) contends that ambiguity about the role of school social workers may stem from an inadequate understanding of the social worker's professional capacity to aid in various educational, training, and extracurricular socialising activities for learners. It may be argued that to alleviate this ambiguity, there is a need for different contexts to develop and disseminate clear, concise and widely understood definitions or descriptions of school social work as a professional practice which would be distributed to schools, teachers, parents and other educational officials.

In the South African context, little literature can be found reflecting on the challenges faced in school social work practice (Khumalo & Pretorius, 2024; Pretorius, 2020; Reyneke, 2020; Van Sittert & Wilson, 2016). These challenges predominantly stem from the uncertainty and lack of understanding of school social work roles across the nine South African provinces and government departments (Pretorius, 2020). Reyneke (2020) confirms this and posits that school social workers are relatively needed professionals in the South African education systems, and school principals and teachers are often uncertain about school social workers' roles and tasks.

Moreover, the ambiguity in the roles and practices of school social workers may also be due to discrepancies and inconsistencies with models, approaches, methods, philosophies and working styles adopted by school social workers in South Africa (Pretorius, 2020). Van Sittert and Wilson (2018) found no uniformity in the roles and responsibilities of school social workers, contributing to the overall challenges faced within the practice. This was also highlighted by Kemp (2014), who stated that no national guidelines clarified the roles of school social workers. Van Sittert and Wilson (2018) recommended that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) provide support for

school social workers due to the absence of standardised guidelines for their professional roles and responsibilities, insufficient professional supervision, and a lack of acknowledgement of school social work as a distinct specialisation.

This recommendation is crucial for establishing school social work as a distinct specialisation, with the obligation of confirming the roles and expectations of school social workers resting on the relevant educational departments (National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2012). In the context of Gauteng province, this responsibility falls to the Gauteng Department of Education (DBE) and the Gauteng Department of Social Development (DSD), as school social workers are appointed within both entities.

2.3.6 Safeguarding children's rights against harmful disciplinary practices in schools

Research focused on the United States has shown that school social workers struggle with education policies and community culture that support corporal punishment, which includes hitting, spanking, punching, shaking, paddling, and shoving the learner (Dupper & Dingus, 2008). This punishment damages learners, negatively impacts their psychological development, and affects their academic and mental functioning (Maiti, 2021). According to Dupper and Dingus (2008), children with conduct disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of corporal punishment are more likely to act aggressively, become defiant and oppositional, and perform poorly in school.

School social workers have an ultimate responsibility to safeguard children's rights and protection from any form of physical or emotional abuse. They promote healthy, non-violent methods of disciplining the child in school settings. However, this responsibility is affected in some instances as corporal punishment is reinforced by contextual (i.e., religion, culture, ethnicity) norms on child discipline held by the community and school staff. These norms can either support or discourage corporal punishment in child discipline.

Literature (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Moyo et al., 2014; Mweru, 2010; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013) highlights that teachers in some contexts held the belief that corporal punishment was the most efficient and effective form of classroom discipline. Their attitudes towards corporal punishment are influenced by their own experiences and the broader community norms (Heekes et al., 2020; Burton & Leoschut, 2013). According to Dupper and Dingus (2008), support for corporal punishment presents an ethical dilemma for the practice of school social work as they pose the

following question: 'How can social workers support actions and conditions that facilitate the healthy development of children and simultaneously respect cultural, religious, and ethnic preferences regarding child-rearing practices that run contrary to the healthy development of children and youths?'

This is a challenge for school social workers as their suggested methods of discipline may sometimes clash with those of teachers and other school staff in instances where corporal punishment is supported. This support is evident in a study by Makhasane and Mthembu (2019), which found that teachers perceive corporal punishment as necessary and helpful in disciplining learners who misbehave. In the South African context, the school social worker's responsibility concerning corporal punishment is non-negotiable, as this practice has been banned in schools since 1996 (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Therefore, by law, "any teachers found using corporal punishment on learners should be charged in a court of law since corporal punishment is banned in South African schools." (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013, p.13)

2.4 EXPLORING THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES

2.4.1 Barriers to learning and problems experienced by school-going children

Barriers to learning are the social, personal, or cognitive obstacles that prevent learners from learning optimally and achieving their developmental and academic goals. These barriers, often referred to as learning problems or psychosocial problems, can be external (extrinsic) and come from the education system or the student's home and community environment. They can also be internal (intrinsic) and stem from the students themselves (Adelman & Taylor, 2017).

Literature indicates that these barriers and problems experienced by learners include the use of substances which harm the learners' social experiences and may lead to participation in criminal activities (Mohasoa & Mokoena, 2017; Zastrow et al., 2019), adverse mental health-related problems resulting to depression or development of anxiety (Ajaero et al., 2018), teenage pregnancy (Mekonen, 2024; Ngunyulu et al., 2016), bullying and violence which results to cognitive functioning difficulties, behavioural problems, and decreased school attendance (Lloyd, 2018; Okeke et al., 2024). These barriers can significantly impact a learner's ability to engage with and succeed in their learning environment, and they often require targeted support and interventions to address (Khumalo et al., 2024; Merga, 2019). Moreover, these problems may be dependent on the developmental age of learners and based on their family background, social and

life experiences, gender, family socioeconomic standing, and individual personalities (Government of Sierra Leon, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2015).

2.4.2 Linking the home environment to school-going children's experiences

Research on the influence of environmental context on child development is crucial because it enhances understanding of the developing child and points to opportunities for change if a child or group of children are not thriving (Grace et al., 2017). Therefore, many researchers recognise that the home environment plays a vital role in the development and education of children (Barboza et al., 2021). Studies by Khan et al. (2019) and Mensah et al. (2024) emphasise that home factors significantly influence children's educational and developmental success.

Parents' involvement lays the foundation for a learner's success at home as they create a safe and nurturing environment, provide engaging learning opportunities, offer unwavering support, and instil a positive view of school (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Oludare and Alade's (2018) study suggests a strong link between a parent's educational background and their level of support for their child's learning, contributing to more effective learning outcomes for learners.

This highlights the importance of parental education and support in the home environment. Additionally, Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017) have shown that parents with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in activities that support their children's learning, such as reading with them, helping with homework, attending school events, providing tutoring resources provided by schools. Li and Qui (2018, p. 19) state that “parents cultivate children's interest in learning and learning habits through educational participation and behavioural support for their children, thereby affecting children's academic achievement”.

Other studies hold a different stance regarding the level of education of parents and family support has on the learner's development. For instance, Eke (2009) discovered parent's level of education is not significantly related to the effective learning of primary school pupils, suggesting that even less educated or illiterate parents can effectively support their children in their schooling. The absence or lack of support by parents, specifically those in underdeveloped and developing communities, regarding their children's learning, may be due to factors such as parents being preoccupied with the distractions and demands of daily life (i.e., burdened by low-income, inflexible work hours, multiple employments) (Chen et al., 2024; Khumalo & Pretorius, 2024). These demands leave less time to dedicate to school activities and involvement and less energy for hands-on engagement with their child's schooling.

In certain situations, such as in China, many parents migrated to urban centres for work and left their children behind, which impacted the level of support their children received (Hong et al., 2019). Such situations highlight the structural factors that contribute to parents' challenges and struggles to effectively be present in their children's lives and support them in their development. Further complicating matters, parents who may not have had a strong academic experience can feel discouraged. This lack of confidence stems from their educational background (Tan et al., 2021), which can make the complexities of the current system and increasingly demanding homework daunting (Flynn, 2007). As a result, they may feel ill-equipped to support their children's learning. Further evidence by Hill and Taylor (2004, p.162) asserts that "parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face many more barriers to involvement, including nonflexible work schedules, lack of resources, transportation problems, and stress due to residing in disadvantaged neighbourhoods."

Although Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017) stress that parental involvement holds more significant value in the learners' development and academic prospects, other studies expand that other factors should be considered that negatively affect learners. Adelman and Taylor (2017) and Li and Qui (2018) identify these other home factors as related to a family's low socioeconomic (SES) standing, which is discussed in depth hereafter. Specifically, household low SES has a significant impact on development and education. Children from low-SES households typically face various challenges that can negatively affect their academic performance and overall educational outcomes (Khumalo & Pretorius, 2024; Ren & Xin, 2013; Harwell et al., 2017).

For instance, they tend to perform poorly academically compared to their peers from higher SES backgrounds (Yan & Gai, 2022). The disparity in academic performance is evident from the early stages of education, as children from low-SES families often enter kindergarten, early education or primary school with lower language skills and score lower in mathematics and reading. Evidence from Javaid (2022) in Pakistan, Chetty (2019) in South Africa, and Burroughs-Lange and Douëtil (2007) in poor rural schools in the United Kingdom confirms that there is a relationship between the families' low SES and children's lower literacy level and overall poor academic performance.

In their discussion, Goudeau et al. (2023) highlight that in various classroom settings like group discussions, learners are encouraged to voice their opinions and share personal experiences, a practice more commonly promoted by middle- and high-SES parents than those from low-SES backgrounds. This disparity contributes to the perpetuation of social class stereotypes that unfairly

label children from low-SES backgrounds as potentially incompetent when it comes to participation. As a result of this stereotype, the children's "social identity threat might make whole-class discussions feel psychologically "unsafe" for low-SES learners, undermining their engagement and leading them to contribute less than would be expected given their language proficiency" (Goudeau et al., 2023, p. 3137). Therefore, interventions such as support for families with low SES and their children need to be provided early to ensure a solid foundation of skills for all children (Goudeau et al., 2023) and are likely to be more effective than intervening at later stages (Duncan et al., 2011).

Yan and Gai (2022) stated that the financial capital available to children from low-SES households can significantly limit the resources available for their development, which may negatively impact their academic performance. Parents from low-SES backgrounds often struggle to provide their children with the necessary resources, such as educational materials, extracurricular activities, and access to quality healthcare, which can further exacerbate the educational disparities.

This global challenge has implications for their academic performance, social development, and overall well-being (Chen et al., 2024). Practically, many scholars have reflected on learners with more home resources having higher science achievement levels (Ho, 2010; Huang & Liang, 2016). According to Ho's (2010) findings, learners in Hong Kong who had access to educational and cultural resources at home exhibited higher self-efficacy in science.

Additionally, the study revealed a positive correlation between the availability of home cultural resources and learners' academic achievement in science. A South African survey with adolescents indicated that the participants perceived their household's low financial standing as a factor that contributed to their psychosocial developmental challenges, as the household income was reported only to be sufficient to meet the physiological needs of the adolescents and other members of the household (Khumalo & Pretorius, 2025).

Statistics South Africa (2022) found that children were also affected by the lack of access to water and sanitation, with less than 10% of households without access to safe and improved drinking water and 20% without access to acceptable and improved sanitation. In their study, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2013) linked student achievement with parental occupation status, particularly those in high-paying jobs requiring intellectual interest and ongoing learning. As a result, parents in such roles may model a love of learning for their children, challenge them intellectually, and encourage activities that stimulate the mind at home.

Building upon this idea, Xie et al. (2015) further noted that parents with higher incomes have the means to nurture their children's interests in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Wealthier parents can provide encouragement and access to enriching experiences directly related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Income also influences where a family lives (Eccles, 2005). This, in turn, affects the quality of schools and the overall environment a child experiences, shaping their opportunities and potential challenges.

2.4.3 Mental health problems experienced by school-going children

As a result of the different contextual factors that learners are exposed to in their school, home, and community environment, some learners are bound to experience mental health problems, which may be argued as a personal related problem. Polanczyk et al. (2015) found that adolescents from 41 studies in 27 countries had at least 11% to 16% of all children and adolescents affected with one or more mental disorders.

Danielson and colleagues (2022) analysed data from 2013 to 2019. They discovered that among U.S. children and adolescents aged between three and 17 years, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and anxiety disorders were the most common, affecting approximately one in 11 (9.4%–9.8%) children. In contrast, a Chinese study (Li et al., 2021a) found that 17.5% of school children and adolescents aged between six and 16 years suffered from mental health disorders, with ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and major depressive disorder (MDD) being the most prevalent. An Australian study (Islam et al., 2020) reported that 34.7% of adolescents had a mental disorder and 7.9% reported suicidality.

A sub-Saharan systematic review by Jörns- Jörns-Presentati and colleagues (2021) examined the prevalence of mental health challenges across different countries. In Kenya, a study of 658 high school learners found that 45.90% reported depressive symptoms, with 35.0% experiencing mild, 29.2% moderate, and 16.9% severe symptoms (Osborn et al., 2019). Another study in Nigeria, involving adolescents from four private and three public secondary schools, reported a depression prevalence of 21.2%, with 16.1% screening positive for moderate, 4.6% for moderately severe, and 0.5% for severe depression symptoms (Fatiregun & Kumapayi, 2014). In the South African context, it is estimated that 20% of youth learners struggle with mental health challenges, such as depression and stress-related conditions, annually (Ajaero et al., 2018).

Considering that South Africa is diverse and is an unequal society, which shows itself through provinces having different problems within education systems, it is also vital to examine the

prevalence of mental health issues amongst school-going children by province. For instance, Mkhize et al. (2024) investigated the prevalence of depression among school-going adolescents in Western Cape. They found that out of 621 surveyed learners aged 10 to 14 years, 33.5% (n =208) reported experiencing symptoms of depression, and 20.9% (n =130) symptoms of anxiety, potentially indicative of a diagnosis. Previous research links these mental health experiences of school-going children to various contextual socio-cultural issues. For instance, Ajele and colleagues (2025) found that childhood adversity and bullying are significantly linked to mental health challenges in South African high school students, with peer pressure acting as a mediator. Similarly, Louw and Bach (2010) found that there was a link between witnessing or experiencing violence at home, school and community levels, and depressive symptoms in both ethnic groups. A study by Donald et al. (2019) involved teachers and revealed that, in addition to depression and anxiety, learners also experience other serious mental health concerns, such as aggression, drug addiction, and academic-related problems like concentration issues. Mahlangu et al. (2021) confirm that home circumstances can significantly impact learners' mental health functioning. Learners who experience a lack of care, support, and neglect at home are more prone to poor mental health outcomes.

2.4.4 School-based violence

The World Health Organisation defines violence in this regard as a bio-psychosocial problem that may be described as fights, vandalism, exercising of power over others and the intentional physical and non-physical acts that result in harm and pain to others (Krug, 2002). There is a globally agreed upon understanding of school violence, which is violence that shows itself through learner victimisation (fighting, bullying, alienation, teasing, harassment), child abuse (neglect, sexual, physical and emotional), maltreatment, gender-related violence and crime in the family, school and community (Davids & Waghid, 2016; UBS Optimus Foundation, 2016; Pretorius, 2020).

Previous studies show that school violence is a pervasive problem that affects learners' psychosocial development and academic success (Khumalo et al., 2025). Moreover, the detrimental consequences of school-related violence extend to families and the broader society (BenYishay et al., 2024). Children who experience violence in schools suffer a variety of negative educational impacts, including lower test scores and higher rates of absenteeism (Deole, 2018). A United Kingdom study found that the prevalence of self-reported bullying experiences was recorded at 23.9% (Nation et al., 2023).

In a Brazilian study, it was reported that violence was through aggression, with 62.2% suffering from aggressing and 51.9% perpetuating aggression (Beserra, Carlos, Leita0 & Ferraina, 2019). Drawing attention to South Africa, according to Pretorius (2020), violence is entrenched in all citizens' social fabric and context. Therefore, it is not surprising to find violence, together with crime, evident in schools, with learners and teachers being both victims and perpetrators.

Reddy et al.'s (2016) input in the 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Report in South Africa reported that nearly one in five learners (17%) reported experiencing bullying regularly. The most pertinent acts of violence in South African schools, particularly public government schools, include bullying, physical violence, sexual violence, corporal punishment and gang violence (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Lumadi, 2024; Mosito & Sitoyi, 2024).

The effects of violence include the stress on the children and raise their levels of anxiety and vulnerability (Donald et al., 2019). To curb the spread and the aliveness of violence in schools, individual schools are reported to have policies in place. For example, in South Africa, Maphalala and Mabunda (2014) explain that even though policies and codes of conduct for learners in Western Cape schools have been developed and put in place, the school still battled with violent behaviours of learners, physical and sexual abuse, and gang activities.

BenYishay et al.'s (2024) study revealed that many children experience physical violence at school, a phenomenon more widespread than commonly believed or reported. The overall prevalence of school-related violence, including sexual and physical violence, showed that 33.7% of females and 33.8% of males were affected. The researchers also found that, although both male and female class mates perpetrated violence against opposite-gender classmates, same-gender violence was more common. Additionally, while sexual violence was less prevalent than physical violence, it still occurred and affected both male and female learners.

Garcia-Cerde et al. (2023) link school violence with the earlier identified personal problem of mental health challenges. They reported that it was determined that the greater the verbal and physical violence suffered, the greater the chance of having psychiatric symptoms, especially amongst those adolescents who suffered physical violence. These results are in agreement with previous studies that highlighted the association between school violence and poor mental health in adolescents (Li, 2023; Wu, Qi & Zhen, 2021) since victims of bullying are more likely to have depression symptoms, anxiety, stress, behavioural problems, and a reduction of prosocial behaviour (Källmén & Hallgren, 2021).

Fabbi et al. (2022) also found that one in ten refugee children in their study experienced depression as a direct result of school violence. The study further revealed that refugee children in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp were subjected to high levels of violence from both teachers and peers. Specifically, nearly half of the learners reported physical violence from teachers and one in four experienced peer victimisation. Emotional violence affected between 15 and 35% of children, with both teachers and peers identified as common perpetrators. Additionally, learners were at risk of sexual abuse, with between 3 and 8% reporting some experience of sexual violence from teachers and/or peers.

In addition to their experiences of academic difficulties in learning, motor impairments, and social adjustments, children with special needs are subjected to violence too. Duque et al. (2021) emphasised that children with disabilities are particularly susceptible to violence in the school environment, which has a detrimental impact on their overall well-being and health. Although violence experienced in special needs schools or inclusive schools is similar to that reported in other school settings, the depth of violence they experience differs. Research shows that when confronted by violence, children with disabilities find themselves defenceless and unprotected, and this further compounds their difficulties in the school setting and their overall psychosocial development (Duque et al., 2021; Malecki et al., 2020). Devries et al. (2014) reported that children with disabilities are 3 to 4 times more likely to experience violence through bullying compared to developing children.

To the contrary, Vizer's (2015, p. 79) study "revealed that there was no difference between the patterns of violence found among learners with special needs compared to those found among learners without special needs, apart from a higher level of theft concerning learners with special needs. However, there was a greater tendency towards violence among boys compared to girls in both groups." Consequences of violence towards children with disabilities included continued lessened social ties and support networks (Duque et al., 2021), poor school participation, and impact on communication skills, personal characteristics, and intellectual skills (i.e., language skills, mathematical skills, graphical skills, three-dimensional visualisation skills, information-processing skills and reasoning skills) (Drummond & Selvaratnam, 2009; Olivier et al., 2020). Additionally, they too are prone to depressive symptoms, psychological harm, harm to self-esteem and self-confidence and poor academic performance (Duque et al., 2021; Olivier et al., 2020).

2.4.5 Violence directed at non-heterosexual school-going children

Notable in the literature on barriers to learning experienced by learners also includes sexuality issues, which are ultimately connected to gender struggles (Francis, 2017). Across the world, there is an understanding that learners hold diverse sexual identities [i.e., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual+ (LGBTQIA+)], and these learners often experience negative stereotypical behaviours while in the school environment. Kaiser (2017) suggests that the presence of heteronormativity in the classroom or school setting can create obstacles to learning for LGBTQIA+-identifying learners.

Heteronormativity, a social construct, is defined as the belief that heterosexuality is the standard and accepted form of sexuality, where sex, gender identity, gender expression, gender roles, and sexual orientation are expected to align with societal norms of male and female (Ferrari et al., 2021). Research indicates a link between heteronormative school environments and the psychosocial and academic development of learners (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Kaiser, 2017; McBrien et al., 2022; Nichols & Brown, 2021). McBrien et al. (2022) outlined that learners that identify as LGBTQIA+ form part of the minority group in schools and are often excluded by heteronormative learners and teachers and fall prey to physical and psychological harassment.

In Australia, the Dyson et al. (2003) study concluded that heteronormative school settings contributed to the depression, self-harm and dropping out experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners. An analysis based in the United States posited that school environments are unsafe for LGBTQIA+ learners. It confirmed that learners are subjected to hostile school environments, which include bullying and discrimination based on sexual identity and orientation (Russell et al., 2021). Similar studies in Spain (Piedra et al., 2015), and Japan (Moore, 2016), to mention a few, have also reported on this significant destructive impact of heteronormative environment on LGBTQI+ learners' overall well-being.

While South Africa upholds LGBTQIA+ rights through law, bullying in schools continues at a high rate, negatively affecting learner retention, including LGBTQIA+ learners. This, therefore, signifies that the realities of South African LGBTQIA+ learners are no different. Reygan (2018) confirms this by stating that bullying related to gender orientation and identity is common in South African schools and reveals itself through the use of derogatory terms such as *isitabane* in isiZulu, *moffie* in Afrikaans, and *faggot* in English. They acknowledge that it harms the learners.

Studies by Francis (2019) revealed that over 10% of South African youth experience same-sex attractions and are at risk of experiencing physical and emotional harassment daily due to their

sexual orientation and identity. A study by Daniels et al. (2019) found that among participants, school-based discrimination perpetrated by teachers and peers had a detrimental effect on school attendance and discouraged personal, gender, and sexual expression. In some instances, Msibi (2012) notes that the problem is exacerbated by the school administrators who not only condoned the discriminatory actions of teachers and peers but also punished those attempting to defend themselves or express their identities by lowering their grades and reinforcing heteronormative curricular content.

Further research reveals that LGBTQIA+ learners were subjected to harassment by peers, teachers, and school administrators, as well as avoidance and rejection (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020; Langa, 2015). School peers were found to be particularly unaccepting, viewing homosexuality as "un-Christian, sexually aberrant, perverse, contaminating and threatening to the institution of the heterosexual family" (Langa, 2015, p. 32). These terms reflect broader cultural meanings that shape how learners and school administrators treat learners who identify as LGBTQIA+. Language in this regard plays a crucial role, as Brown and Buthelezi (2020) note that violence towards this learner group is perpetuated through homophobic language to ridicule, humiliate, and control.

2.4.6 General Support Services in the South African School Systems

The provision of support services also referred to as Educational Support Services (ESS) is located within the inclusive education legislations and policies (e.g., Education White Paper 6, SIAS) of South Africa's Education systems. There is a general understanding across literature that ESS refers to the support that learners receive during the period they attain their education (Kwatubana & Ebrahim, 2020; Mosia, 2011). ESS is a crucial component of any education system and for effective teaching. Hay and Joubert (2021) explain that ESS relates to all the psychosocial educational support services provided to learners and schools.

Internationally, ESS has been established to respond to learners' psychosocial problems and to provide optimal assistance to learners, teachers, and schools. For instance, the Government of Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2015) developed a training manual for teachers and other stakeholders to support the well-being of learners after the Ebola outbreak and crisis. This manual offers basic skills and tools teachers can use to provide psychosocial support for distressed children and foster resilience and coping amongst children and their families. It can be argued that the knowledge and practical skills outlined in the manual would be impactful for teachers to support learners with different psychosocial problems. In

Lesotho, the various support services provided to children with special needs include teachers with basic sign language skills to communicate with children who are deaf and in-service training for teachers working with children living with disabilities (Mosia, 2011).

In the South African context, ESS is provided by support structures that interact with each other to deliver diverse, unified and in some cases, more specialised services. These structures include the *School-Based Support Team (SBST)* and *District-Based Support Team (DBST)* (i.e., structures where the majority of the current school social workers are located) (Makhalemele et al., 2021; Vergottini, 2019). The SBST is a support structure that assists teachers in effectively providing necessary support to learners who experience difficulties stemming from their home, social and school environment that may act as barriers to their learning and development. It follows the support framework provided in the SIAS policy, which helps determine the needs of the learners, teachers and the school (Department of Education, 2014).

The broad focus of SBST is to assist teachers in creating preventative and promotional approaches to promote healthy functioning schools (Makhalemele et al., 2021). SBST is responsible for determining the support needs of vulnerable learners and learners experiencing barriers to learning and developing individualised/ learner-focused education programmes (Makoelle, 2014). SBST also plays a vital role in admitting learners with special needs into schools. This includes screening learner admissions and class placement, identifying the specific support that the learner will need, and orientating teachers to meet the support needs of those learners (Makhalemele et al., 2021). The SBST personnel include teachers, parents/ caregivers, learners, community members and other stakeholders such as local Non-Governmental Organisations and members from the different support structures (Full-Service Schools, Special Schools Resource Centres and DBST) (Nel et al., 2016). While the roles and responsibilities of SBST members on paper indicate that the support structure should significantly contribute to learners, teachers, and schools and the development of inclusive practices in school institutions, practically, on the ground, it is different.

Some of the teachers installed in SBST to support learners do not have the necessary knowledge, training and skills for guidance and learner support (Motistwe, 2014). This, therefore, makes it essential to have school social work representation in the SBST to provide social work service-related support to learners and guidance and support to the school.

Vergottini (2019) explains that school social workers placed at the school would need to report to the school principals and the social work supervisors at the DBST level for professional guidance and consultation. Additionally, there is a lack of collaboration between SBST and other support

structures. For instance, the SBST adopts inclusive practices without considering and evaluating their applicability within the school and cultural context of learners, and there is a lack of reflection on the practices that are relevant in schools and for the needs of learners (Makoelle, 2014).

DBST has the function of integrating a network of professional support for schools at the district level to identify and address barriers to learning and promote effective teaching and learning (Makhalemele & Nel, 2015). It is responsible for the following:

Coordinating support services with other departments, mobilising already existing community resources such as NGOs, linking schools with formal and informal support systems in the community, assessing the level of support learners need in consultation with the parents, teachers and stakeholders, monitoring the curriculum and institutional development support needed and make such support available, facilitate placement and admission administration of all learners to schools (DoE, 2007).

The DSBT members should include professionals such as educational psychologists, counsellors, speech and hearing therapists, community health care workers, welfare workers employed by the Department of Education, Non-Governmental Organisations or Community Based Organisations; learning-support personnel, teachers and administrative personnel; curricular and institutional development support at district levels; and teachers from Special Schools as Resource Centres (Makhalemele & Nel, 2015). With a specific focus on school social workers, Vergottini (2019) explains that having them at the DBST level is essential as their role includes rendering services to SBST. DBST have not been effective in successfully cementing their functions as Nel et al. (2016) argue that its members are not adequately skilled in helping and supporting learners who experience barriers to learning in the school environment.

2.5 SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK TRAINING AND EDUCATION

The NASW (2012) states that school social workers must have specialised knowledge and understanding of the education system. Therefore, suggesting a specialisation certificate for licensing school social workers (National Association of Social Workers, 2002), which is noted to be necessary for the accountability of social workers within a multidisciplinary educational context (Alvarez & Harrington, 2004; Sabatino et al., 2013). This suggests that the professional identity of school social work, like any other professional field, should be tied to appropriate training, qualifications, and accreditation processes (Sabatino et al., 2013).

Training programmes for school social workers are essential as they would adequately prepare these professionals to help children cope with and alleviate the many challenges they face, contribute to their positive educational experience, and assist in making schools inclusive and safe (Constable et al., 2006). Michigan Department of Education (2019, p. 2) explains that any training programme related to school social work should “comprise multiple interdependent components that prepare candidates for certification to demonstrate proficiencies defined by several aligned sets of standards”. In light of this, there is a dearth of literature reporting on the training and education of school social workers. Most studies conducted are located in the United States (e.g., Alvarez & Harrington, 2004; Berzin & O'Connor, 2010; Constable et al., 2006).

A study conducted by Berzin and O'Connor (2010), which focused on United States 31 school social work syllabuses from Master's in Social Work (MSW) programmes in the United States, revealed that school social workers had gaps in their educational content that may hinder their full understanding their role and practice in the education system. Their study further outlined that the syllabus content lacked focus regarding content related to attendance, learning and school failure, and the changing landscapes of education. The syllabus was highly focused on clinical practice preparation and did not examine the multidisciplinary educational context in which school social workers practice. A study done in Iowa found that social workers felt somewhat ill-prepared in performing their duties and needed more training (Peckover et al., 2013). The lack of a theoretical knowledge base and professional education and training for school social workers, according to Phillippo and Blosser (2013), has negative consequences for the development of the specialised profession.

Research on school social work education and certificate programs has been centred in the United States of America (USA) (e.g., Alvarez & Harrington, 2004; Constable et al., 2006; Mumm & Bye, 2011). Most states require specific degrees, courses, and training to practice school social work. The National Association of State of Boards of Education reported that 27 of the 40 education departments in the USA required a master's degree and were specific about the courses and practicum needed as well as the need for a particular internship (Mumm & Bye, 2011). Of all these departments, only two were specific about the requirements for a master's degree in school social work. A recent study by Forenza and Eckhardt (2020), conducted in the United States, found that 88.5% of the participants had MSW and viewed the education and training they received as beneficial for their roles in school social work. The study also indicated that this training helped them see their students holistically by introducing specific concepts or theories (such as systems theory and empowerment theory) and skills (such as crisis intervention, assessment, and

diagnosis). The concentrated focus of school social work education and certification programs in the United States may prompt questions about the global applicability of these standards and encourages a closer examination of how other countries, especially South Africa, which is the focus of this study, are preparing their school social workers through education and training.

In South Africa, the National Association for Social Work South Africa (NASWSA) established the National Committee for School Social Work Education and Practice (NACOSSWEP), which has the goal of “promoting the specialisation of school social work, supporting school social work knowledge development, and facilitating the development of a school social work model and practice standards” (Kemp, 2017, p. 2). Since the establishment of NACOSSWEP, the University of the Witwatersrand has developed a short course for school social work (Vergottini, 2019) and introduced a master’s degree in social work with a specialisation in school social work (University of the Witwatersrand, n.d).

Vergottini’s (2019) study revealed that there is currently no entry requirement in school social work, just a bachelor’s degree in social work and that possessing an additional qualification (i.e., master’s degree in social work or a training diploma/ certificate) did not advance a professional into being employed as a school social worker. The NACOSSWEP (2015) outlined that training for school social workers needs to be done by social workers at the provincial level, where seminars and training workshops are provided. Apart from this literature (i.e., Huxtable, 2017; NACOSSWEP, 2015; Vergottini, 2019), no further research has been done on school social work education and training in the South African context.

2.6 CONCLUSION

Given the scope of this research, the reviewed literature presented in this section focused broadly on school social work from a global and local context. Specifically, it focused on literature, arguments and interactions concerning the history of school social work. The literature outlined insight into the evolution of school social work in countries such as the United States of America, Korea, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Ghana, among many other countries, and South Africa. The exploration of the evolution of school social work across different countries revealed that the development and growth of the practice have not been consistent, which may indicate that schools, as per their traditional mandate, have always been an environment for teaching and learning and not necessarily for social services intervention by social workers. Nevertheless, recognition is noted in the development of school social work as a professional practice and a specialisation field within social work through a comprehensive literature outline on the roles of school social

workers, challenges faced by school social workers, as well as professional education and training promoting the specialisation. The next chapter introduces and discusses the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study (i.e., social constructionism theory and critical social theory).

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM THEORY & CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The theoretical framework is the blueprint and foundation from which all knowledge is constructed and developed for a research study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It serves as a guide and “a structure that guides research by relying on a formal theory...constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships” (Eisenhart, 1991, p. 205). Grant and Osanloo (2014) explain that theoretical frameworks are important as they guide the rationale of the study, the problem statement, the research question/s, and the overall purpose and significance of the study. In this chapter, the researcher discusses the theoretical frameworks adopted for the study. Against this background and rationale, which the researcher outlined in Chapter One, the specific purpose of this chapter is to present the basic characteristics of the tenets of social constructionism theory (SCT) and critical social theory (CST) and discuss their implications for social work in education settings

In qualitative research, the theoretical framework provides an overall orienting lens for the study questions in which the lens becomes a “transformative perspective to bring about change, life to the voices of underrepresented groups, and uncover largely hidden assumptions of individuals” (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 65). The theoretical framework informs and anchors the study's methodology and how data is collected and analysed (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

According to Lysaght (2011, p. 572), it is necessary to identify one's theoretical framework for a dissertation study because “a researcher's choice of framework is not arbitrary but reflects important personal beliefs and understandings about the nature of knowledge, how it exists (in the metaphysical sense) concerning the observer, and the possible roles to be adopted, and tools to be employed consequently, by the researcher in his/her work”. Therefore, the researcher understood that the structure and vision for the current study would be unclear without a theoretical framework. Metaphorically speaking, if the structure is ambiguous, the study would be more like a house that cannot be constructed without a blueprint or foundation plan (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). In contrast, Grant and Osanloo (2014) state that a research plan with a theoretical framework allows the dissertation study to be intense and structured with an organised flow from one chapter to the next.

3.2 THE THEORETICAL TRIANGULATION

In considering various theoretical frameworks applicable to this study, the researcher found himself resonating with Iqbal's (2007, p.17) statement that reflects the struggle to identify and prepare the theoretical framework for the dissertation as "the most difficult but not impossible part of [the] proposal". Like many other learners across the globe, the researcher was also confused (Grant & Osanloo, 2024) when choosing a theoretical framework simply because he wanted to adopt a framework that 'clearly and best suited' the study questions. Nevertheless, after a vast process of reading and rereading different theories in the field of social work and broad theories in social sciences and humanities, the researcher concluded that the tenets of SCT and CST hold much value for a conceptualised study like this one.

SCT is well-suited to explore the social workers' experiences and perspectives about the practice of school social workers. School social work is a developing profession in South Africa, and practitioners' roles are defined and constructed within specific education systems. Moreover, practitioners actively shape and negotiate their roles and responsibilities based on the contextual needs of the learners and their relationships and partnerships with school staff and other professionals interested in school wellbeing.

On the other hand, CST provides a critical lens for examining power structures and systemic barriers in the education systems that influence this construction. These powerful and systematic barriers potentially contribute to the marginalisation of social workers in their roles and reinforce existing inequalities in education systems. The integration of these theories offers a comprehensive perspective that aligns with the qualitative nature of this research study. In the sections below, these theoretical frameworks are discussed in detail, starting with the SCT.

3.3 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM THEORY

Social constructionism theory (henceforth, SCT) is a theoretical framework in sociology that examines the collective knowledge and perceptions of the world formed by individuals (Amineh & Asl, 2015). According to sociologists Berger and Luckmann (1942), this theoretical framework acknowledges that human beings construct their world through interactions and that any activity that is repeated often becomes a pattern that can be repeated in the future in similar ways and with similar economic effort. Lee and Greene (2001) further explain that people come to know the world and reality by interacting with it (other people, organisations, and institutions within their world). As a result, these social encounters and interactions shape one's knowledge or reality.

Sahin (2013, p.3) explains that SCT is an “approach to human inquiry that encompasses a critical stance to taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world, which are seen as reinforcing the interests of dominant social groups and a belief that the way we understand the world is a product of a historical process of interaction and negotiation between groups of people.” As such, through SCT, our understanding of the world is not objective but the result of our social interactions, language and shared meaning.

Social constructionism and social constructivism have often been used interchangeably (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Greene, Jensen & Jones, 1996; Lee & Greene, 1999, 2001; Taylor, 2018). However, while many similarities between the two theories exist, there are some distinctions. Their similarities include that “both view reality as relative to social interaction and the social context rather than as completely objective and out there waiting to be discovered” and that reality is socially constructed through language. And that language itself is also socially constructed (Sahin, 2013, p.2).

Social constructionism emerged as a critical response to positivist and essentialist views of reality, which argued that knowledge and social phenomena exist independently of human interpretation (Gergen, 1985; Sahin, 2013) and focus on the things that are created through the process of social interaction. There are two types of social constructionism: strong and weak. 1) the strong, which believes that all knowledge is socially constructed, and 2) the weak, which considers knowledge socially constructed but acknowledges that some things are not (Taylor, 2018). Burr and Dick (2017) point out that the difference between the two might also be the extent to which the individual is seen as an agent who is in control of this construction process and the extent to which our constructions are the product of social forces, is either structural or interactional. It is imperative to reflect both frameworks’ similarities and draw their differences as this research work focuses explicitly on a strong SCT.

Padgett (2016) explains that SC focuses on how social and cultural factors shape our world understanding and the idea that knowledge is not discovered but is created, a product of the perspective of the observers. Berger and Luckman (1991) concur with this, noting that SCT is concerned with the nature and construction of knowledge (how it emerged and how it has come to be and has significance in society) and that knowledge is created by the interactions of individuals in society. They further explain that society exists as objective reality (interactions between people in the social world and the social world, influencing people, resulting in creating routines and capitalisation) and subjective reality through primary and secondary socialisation

(e.g., being given an identity and a place in society). Emphasis is placed on the medium of language as people's sense of reality results from the use of language within social interactions in their interpersonal relationships, engagements within the organisation and institutional context and in group interactions (Becvar et al., 1997). Reality is influenced by cultural, historical, political and economic factors in society and one's community (Gergen, 1985).

Lee and Greene (2001) highlight that while language in the context of social constructionism provides words and categories through which people make sense of their experiences in the world, these words and categories of language are ambiguous. As a result, language is part of people's life experiences and helps them interpret their experiences and the meaning given to them. Gergen (1985) and Sahin (2013) expand on this theory, noting that people develop taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world through the words and categories used in language and in discourses. These assumptions are sustained by the social, moral, political, and economic institutions in which we exist and shape our reality. Moreover, Burr (2024) explains that social constructionism warns us to be constantly wary of our presumptions about the world as it appears since this is drawn from our experiences and perceptions, and might not be an actual reflection of the world.

McLeod's (1997) work introduces several features of social constructionism, namely: i) social constructionists reject the traditional positivistic approaches to knowledge that are basically not reflexive in nature; ii) social constructionists take a critical stance in relation to taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world, which are seen as reinforcing the interests of dominant social groups; iii) social constructionists uphold the belief that the way we understand the world is a product of a historical process of interaction and negotiation between groups of people; iv) social constructionists maintain that the goal of research and scholarship is not to produce knowledge that is fixed and universally valid, but to open up an appreciation of what is possible; v) social constructionism represents a movement toward redefining psychological constructs such as the mind, self, and emotion as socially constructed processes that are not intrinsic to the individual but produced by social discourse.

Social constructionism is grounded in several principles, which include the following: 1) realities are socially constructed, 2) realities are constituted through language, 3) social processes sustain knowledge, and 4) reflexivity in human beings is emphasised. In the below sub-sections, the researcher outlines what these tenets mean according to various literature (Burr, 1995; Cuichi et

al., 2012; Galbin, 2014; Hoffman, 1991; Lit & Shek, 2002; McNamee & Gergen, 1992; Sahin, 2013) to provide more context to this chosen theoretical framework.

1. Realities are socially constructed: this principle reflects that what we understand as realities or as 'reality' is, in fact, not an objective truth but rather a product of social processes and interactions (Sahin, 2013). Therefore, people's perceptions of reality are a product of their experiences, cultural backgrounds and social contexts (Cojocaru et al., 2012).
2. Realities are constituted through language: This tenet reflects the notion that we bring forth a reality every time we speak. This means that every time individuals and groups interact verbally through language, they give meaning and legitimacy to the distinction those words bring forth (Sahin, 2013). Galbin (2014, p.90) alludes that language is "a fundamental process of knowledge production" and that it "is not conceived of as describing and representing the world, but as a way of constructing it, being a form of social action". These concepts eventually become habituated into reciprocal roles played by the actors towards each other. Language, speech and communication are perceived as more than just a way of interacting and connecting people. It is how individuals and groups express themselves; they become a vehicle for constructing our understanding of the world, ourselves and our realities (Galbin, 2014; Lit & Shek, 2002). Moreover, through language, people agree and share meaning, constructing their realities. In a nutshell, language is a fundamental social phenomenon and meanings which has been built and carried in the language are not fixed, and are often open to questions, always contestable and temporary (Burr, 1995).
3. Social processes sustain knowledge: the social constructivist theory ascertains that knowledge is not static but continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interactions and processes. This principle emphasises that learning occurs in a social context, where individuals and groups engage with one another to share insight and challenge perspectives. Knowledge is embedded in the institutional fabric of society, and it evolves in the space between people and the realm of the everyday world (Hoffman, 1991). Practically, Sahin (2013; 1995, p. 184) states that social constructionism provides an understanding that our knowledge and the idea of knowing are also shared by our societies' social, cultural, historical, economic and political conditions. Galbin (2014) adds that we coexist in a world of conversational story, and we learn about one another and ourselves by modifying our self-descriptions and stories..

4. Reflexivity in human beings is emphasised: this last principle acknowledges that humans are reflective beings and emphasises the need for self-reflection that might open future alternative forms of understanding (McNamee & Gergen, 1992). In essence, reflexivity is the ability of individuals and groups to reflect on their own beliefs, perceptions, and experiences and comprehend how these influence their understanding of their world. Through reflexivity, Lit and Shek (2002, p. 112) note that it “refers to the process that questions the effects of subjectivity on understanding and interpretation and queries the taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world appears to be”.

SCT is closely related to the value systems and missions of the social work profession and discipline. The relevance of SCT is practical as social constructionism and social workers endeavour to interrogate prevailing knowledge frameworks and seek to comprehend the influences of history and culture. However, the application and discussions of SCT in social work are skewed towards Western literature (Dean & Fleck-Henderson, 1992; Franklin, 1995) and some literature within the Chinese context (Lit & Shek, 2002). Nevertheless, some scholars (e.g., Lee & Greene, 2001; Lit & Shek, 2002; Nathaniel, 2018; Navratil & Bajer, 2018; Sahin, 2013) have justified using this theory. For instance, Lit and Shek (2002) note that SCT influences our understanding of how knowledge is constructed and how interventions are provided in social work. Navratil and Bajer (2018) expand to note that professional expectations shape our experience and understanding of social workers’ roles by defining a predetermined presumption related to practitioners’ specific duties and social processes that lead them to become social workers.

Moreover, the history of social work and its relationship with other professionals, such as those in human services and social work institutions, all impact professional expectations. These are, however, not cast in stone as they change depending on the socio-cultural conditions in any practice context. Lee and Greene (2001) highlight the significance of SCT in empowering clients in which practitioners should adapt their empowerment approaches in consideration of the cultural, historical and contextual situations of their clients, and they should engage clients in consciousness-raising about the impact of dominant discourses on their current constructions of realities. Similarly, Sahin (2013) emphasised the significance of a social constructionism approach in social work, advocating for incorporating clients' narratives and perspectives to understand their issues better. Additionally, social workers attempt to assist their clients with an understanding that economic, political, ideological, and ethical factors are at play in individuals’ lives and then collaborate in problem-solving to address issues faced by their clients.

While SCT offers a powerful theoretical framework to understand how social and cultural factors shape our world, it is not without limitations and critiques. One critique is the theory's overemphasis on culture, language and social interactions, with less attention on cognitive processes. Peterson (2013) explains that some human behaviour may be explained from aspects of cognitive processes which are rooted in biology and psychology and not entirely shared by societal interactions.

Wrong (1961) provides a practical example on the limitations of SCT that it fails to engage scientific evidence on infants' behaviour who have not been much exposed to the social environments. Burr and Dick (2017) also note that the role of individual agency is minimised in SCT, which may underrepresent the agency and cognitive processes of individuals in shaping their realities. Other limitations may be highlighted from a realist perspective that argues that social constructionism leans toward epistemological relativism, therefore making it challenging to assert any claims to truth or objectivity. Specifically, John Maze alludes that internal contradictions exist when social constructionists deny the significance of external reality or objective reality while making knowledge claims (Stam, 2001).

In light of this, the current study focuses on the practice experiences of social workers in Gauteng schools. It explores their perceptions about contextual factors that act as facilitators to the practice of school social work. Through the theory, it is understood that school social workers' experiences are shaped by their interactions with role players in the education systems (i.e., learners, teachers, principals, and other professionals) and the broader community in which the schools are located.

This theory helps to understand how school social workers' roles, identity and practice realities are created through social processes, mainly through their interactions with learners, parents, school staff and other professionals within the education systems. Additionally, their understanding of the significance of the practice is often influenced by the contexts of the schools. For instance, school social workers practice in various settings where there is a need to handle complex cases. Therefore, the realities of school social work are constructed through the unique social context in which the practitioners operate. Language plays a significant role as it shapes the realities of school social work practice, influences the effectiveness of the intervention provided, and influences attitudes around the practice. The knowledge that school social workers possess about school social work is developed through collaborative learning and shared experiences.

3.4 CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

The study integrates SCT with CST, a theoretical framework developed by the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and 1930s, which provides a thorough approach to comprehending and tackling societal inequalities and injustices (Kent, 2000). In the 1960s, scholars such as Juergen Habermas and Paulo Freire posited that Critical Social Theory (CST) serves as a mode of scientific inquiry that explicates distortions and constraints hindering free, equal, and unconstrained societal participation (Fulton, 1997). Historically, this approach gained traction within resistance movements, where scholars contended against social conditions such as fascism, racism, exploitation of women, and prejudice against various groups, including Black individuals and the LGBTQIA+ community (Hall, 1999).

Consequently, empowerment and emancipation from oppression are the catalysts of CST. Similar to McCall et al. (2023), CST is appropriate for this study as it facilitates the overarching objective and methodologies aimed at comprehending the world through the viewpoints of participants and how these viewpoints can foster meaningful social action. This approach enabled the researcher to understand the significance that practitioners in school social work ascribed to the world and realities within school settings.

The fundamental premise of CST is that dialogue is imprinted with values and that norms are contingent upon the context and the individuals involved. This approach examines practices emphasising reflective assessment and critique of social cultures, which are primarily used to investigate and challenge societal discourses (McCall et al., 2023).

CST assert that specific individuals encounter power and privilege throughout life, while others inhabit more marginal and disadvantaged identities and experiences (Sumner & Danielson, 2007). The approach seeks explicitly to actively encourage individuals to interrogate prevailing norms, aiming for the transformation of the constraints imposed by unequal power dynamics through self-reflection. As such, research inquiries are directed to assumptions, unexamined norms, efficacy, and beneficiaries (Sumner & Danielson, 2007). Moreover, the approach provides a framework for comprehending the political and social agendas that shape, restrict, and impact individuals' lives. This tool is essential for revealing the complexities of social work and analysing how discourses within the field shape perceptions of individuals and institutions, and examining processes of marginalisation. Ultimately, CST directs researchers to consider how power functions as an organising social dynamic. This results in researchers analysing power dynamics

to ascertain who benefits from power, who becomes marginalised, and how the process of marginalisation influences individuals, structures, institutions, and practices.

While CST offers distinctive insights into the dynamics of power, oppression, and emancipation, it is not without limitations. For instance, the CST emphasises how knowledge and norms are shaped by power, and realist proponents put forth that certain realities experienced by individuals, such as poverty, systematic inequalities and institutional constraints, exist independently of individuals' interpretation (Habermas, 1987). Nevertheless, this theoretical approach was beneficial as it enabled the study to recognise and articulate systemic oppressions operating within society and in education and social care systems. This approach provides opportunities for substantive interactions with practitioners in school social work. This discipline has been identified as facing marginalisation within the educational system, grappling with its legitimacy, and encountering various challenges that impact service delivery to schools and learners.

The primary objective of this research was to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of practice in the Gauteng Province and to propose, among other recommendations, significant modifications that would enable the practice to function independently as a specialised field. McCall et al. (2023) elucidate that CST is a substantial methodology in professional practices, as it can reveal challenges practitioners encounter that prevailing discourses and social practices may otherwise obscure.

CST elucidates that practitioners operate within systems that marginalise both their professional roles and practices and the users of their services, including schools, learners, and their parents. Practitioners in school social work must critically analyse social systems, policies, and power dynamics that perpetuate marginalisation, inequalities, and oppression faced by specific groups in society, including learners, teachers, parents, and communities (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010; Leonardo, 2004). Ultimately, this evaluates current social conditions and advocates for liberating knowledge. McCall et al. (2023, p.2) contend that through CST, practitioners must focus on patients' everyday concerns and the particular issues they recognise; while addressing immediate care needs, they must also reflect upon and investigate the oppressive conditions encountered by both themselves and their patients.

The oppressive conditions must be examined to comprehend their origins, the measures practitioners can take to mitigate them, and how they can promote service users' autonomy and responsibility (Wilson-Thomas, 1995). Despite the oppressive conditions in educational practices, which are typically associated with curriculum and instruction, practitioners are well-equipped to

challenge discursive limitations in school environments and advocate against social injustices and power imbalances within the system.

These issues manifest through social interactions and arrangements. In contrast to reducing social problems to individual-level factors, CST urges practitioners to address the underlying systemic factors perpetuating these issues (Dant, 2003). It recognises that social problems are deeply rooted in societal structures and calls for efforts to challenge and transform these structures and existing policies and practices. Applying this framework to the current study on school social work allows for evaluating the current state of practice. It facilitates reflective and critical reassessment of the relationship between broader social, economic, and political systems and the everyday practice of school social workers. CST also enables the identification of structural barriers and the critique of education policies impacting school social work. Additionally, it helps understand how school social workers perceive and address the challenges faced by vulnerable children in the Gauteng Province.

This use of CST and SCT provides a robust framework for this study as the theories complement each other. As outlined, SCT provides a framework for understanding the subjective experiences of social workers providing services to schools and the meaning constructed through social interactions within education systems and broader community, while CST brings forth the lens to examine the structural conditions related to power, inequalities and justice that shape these interactions and the marginalisation that exists in school social work practice. Moreover, SCT falls short in sufficiently addressing power dynamics and structural inequalities, thus making it essential to examine CST.

3.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has critically discussed the theoretical frameworks of SCT and CST as the foundational perspectives of this study. These frameworks were intentionally selected due to their alignment with the qualitative, exploratory nature of the research, which aims to comprehend practitioners' experiences in school social work within Gauteng Province. SCT underscores the social and cultural fabrication of knowledge, emphasising the significance of interaction and language in forming our comprehension of the world. This theory is especially pertinent to this study as it facilitates an examination of how school social workers formulate their perceptions of their roles, the obstacles they encounter, and the implications of their interventions. CST offers an essential framework for analysing power dynamics, social disparities, and systemic oppression. This theory is crucial for comprehending the wider context in which school social workers

function and for recognising how they can contest and reform these systems. This study seeks to deliver a nuanced and critical analysis of school social work practice in the Gauteng Province by integrating these two theories. The theoretical framework will direct the research design, data collection, and analysis, ensuring the study is grounded in a rigorous theoretical foundation. The next chapter comprehensively describes the methodology of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter delves into the qualitative methodological framework employed to explore the current state of school social work within Gauteng Province. The study was conducted in the Gauteng province with social workers employed within the Gauteng Department of Social Development and the Gauteng Department of Education and addressed the questions of ‘What is the current state of school social work in public schools of the Gauteng province?’ Moreover, the structure of the chapter takes into consideration key questions that shape qualitative research studies.

The questions included what the setting is and who are the people that will be studied? What methods were used to collect data? How the data was analysed and validated? And what ethical issues were considered in the study? Therefore, all these questions were addressed under the following overarching sections: study setting and background, where the researcher provided the context of the research study; the research paradigm and research design; qualitative research approach and methods; methods of data analysis; trustworthiness; and lastly, ethical considerations.

4.2 STUDY SETTING AND BACKGROUND

The location of the study is a key factor in research, as it provides a physical, social, and cultural context for the researcher to conduct the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, this study was located in the Gauteng Province (GP) of South Africa. This province is an ideal location for conducting the research study as it is home to some of the country’s most populous cities and areas and is ranked first for hosting the largest total population and children’s population.

The total population of the province is estimated to be approximately 15,81 million, and it is home to the majority of children, with close to 5 million children living in the province (Statistics South Africa, 2021). The province also recorded the highest percentage of school absenteeism at 26,5% and an increase in the percentage of children who were out-of-school of 17,2% (Statistics South Africa, 2021). The province is home to 15 school districts located in its five regions (see Figure 2). With these children’s population numbers in mind and the different districts and based on the limited number of social workers providing services in school, it may be argued that insufficient

manpower exists to deal with and support schools and learners with issues such as high rates of absenteeism and out-of-school children.

Based on the current literature on school social work within the South African context done in other provinces (i.e., Western Cape, Free State) (Kemp, 2014; Khanyile, 2020; Lesesa, 2022; Vergottini, 2019), it is assumed that the roles and services of school social workers in the Gauteng Province are unclear. This role confusion may be due to a lack of clear mandates from the DSD and GDE, as well as inadequate training and education in the practice of school social work. On that premise, locating the study in the GP provides a unique opportunity to explore the state of school social work services as it is provided by practitioners employed by the DSD, GDE and specific schools under the SGB.

This exploration is essential for the practice of school social work in the province as knowledge about the experiences of practitioners and contextual factors that act as facilitators and barriers to the practice in education systems and their education and training needs can be generated. Conducting research in GP offers a chance to gain a better understanding of the school social work disparities that may exist in the province and gain insight into the facilitators of school social work services. Figure 2 below is a map layout of the education districts in the GP that social workers cater for.

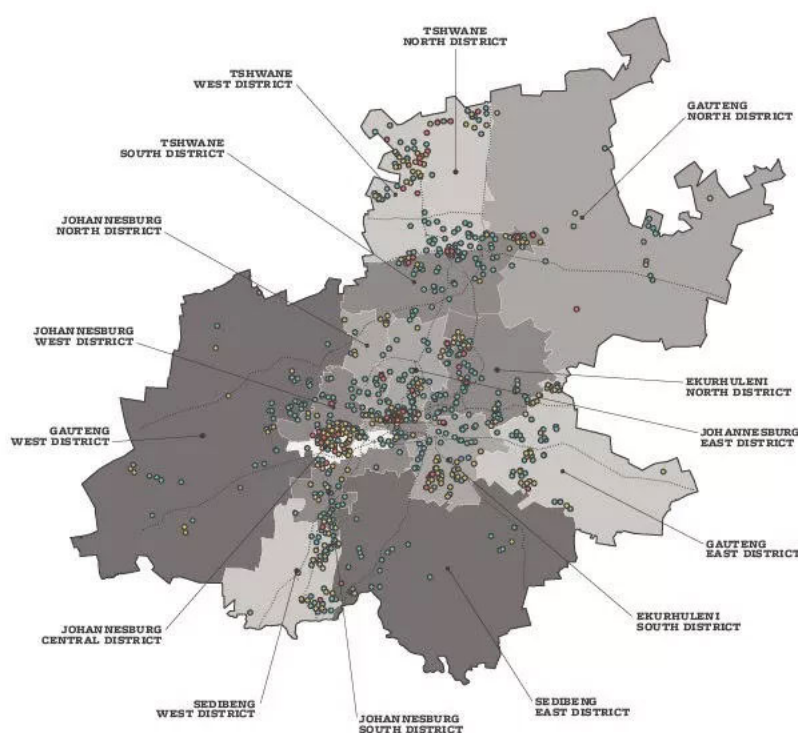


Figure 1: Geographical location of the Gauteng Province school districts (Hamann, 2016)

4.3 RESEARCH PARADIGM AND RESEARCH DESIGN

4.3.1 Research paradigm

A research paradigm is an overarching framework or set of beliefs that guides the research process (Mertens, 2010). It outlines the philosophical assumptions that inform how the researcher will approach their research and how they will interpret the data they collect (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study is rooted in the interpretive paradigm, a philosophical paradigm that views reality as subjective and socially constructed (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). It is based on the idea that meaning is created through social interaction, and understanding a particular phenomenon requires looking at it from the perspective of the people involved (Shah & Al-Bargi, 2013). This paradigm complements the theoretical frameworks, with SCT highlighting that realities are socially constructed through interaction, language, and shared meaning. Meanwhile, CST emphasizes how power, inequality, and dominant discourses shape these realities. As such, the researcher was able to not only understand the subjective experiences of the participants but also understand how these experiences are socially constructed and how broader historical, political, and institutional forces shape the practice of school social work in the South African context.

As explained by Pervin and Mokhtar (2022), the role of the researcher in using an interpretive paradigm is to unravel the meanings attached to the participants' contextual experiences and how those meanings have been constructed. As such, throughout the research process, the researcher was open to the different interpretations of the data and was willing to consider the beliefs, values and experiences of social workers involved in the study. By doing this, he was able to gain insight into the meanings that are being constructed and how they are being used to shape the participants' practice experiences and perspectives of the practice of school social work.

In the subsequent section, the researcher continuously reflected on how he applied this paradigm through the research process, as suggested by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017): 1) **subjectivist epistemology**, how the researcher's meaning of the data was informed by the interactions held with the participants, and how knowledge was constructed as a result of his personal experiences with the participants during data collection; 2) **relativist ontology**, how he came to believe that the situation related to school social work that this study focused on had multiple realities and that those realities can be explored and meaning made of them or reconstructed through human interactions between himself as a researcher and the subjects of the research; 3) **naturalist**

methodology, here the researcher articulated the methodological logic and flow of the systematic processes followed in conducting the research project, with the intention to gain knowledge about the practice of school social work; 4) lastly, balanced **axiology**, whereby the researcher ensured that the outcome of the research study reflected his values utilising an interpretive paradigm by presenting a balanced report of the findings.

4.3.2 Research design

Polit and Beck (2014) explain that exploratory research is used to understand and uncover the complexity of a phenomenon that is not very well understood. The study is exploratory in nature and is justified as the practice of school social work has not been examined in depth in the Gauteng province. Therefore, this suggests there is limited coverage within the literature (Reid-Searl & Happell, 2012). As a researcher had an opportunity to keep an open mind and specifically explored the variables (e.g., contextual factors and experiences) affecting their area of interest. Moreover, the exploratory research allowed the study participants to contribute to the development of new knowledge in the field of school social work.

4.4 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

The researcher approached the research study using qualitative research. This approach focuses on discovering the underlying meanings and insights of a particular situation and tends to be more inductive (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Moreover, qualitative studies attempt to make sense of or interpret the meaning attached to certain things or the meanings connected with the participants' actions and experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). This approach was deemed appropriate because it allowed for the answering of the research 'what' questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), therefore aligning accurately with the already stated questions of this current study. Moreover, the choice of a qualitative approach aligns with the intention of the research study, which is to give voice to social workers in school social work practice and uncover their practice experiences to understand and appreciate them (Lichtman, 2014); the approach further allowed the researcher to describe and interpret the participants' experiences of the practice of school social work (Agius, 2013).

4.4.1 Description of the population and sample

A population is defined as a group of individuals restricted to a geographical region (neighbourhood, city, state, country, continent) or certain institutions (hospitals, schools, health

centres), that is, a set of individuals that have at least one characteristic in common (Martínez-Mesa et al., 2014). With the current study, the broader population consists of social workers in the Gauteng province. The target group, which is a specific subset of this population, comprised social workers providing school social work services to education systems within the province. This target group selection aligns with the definition by Alvi (2016), who states that a target population refers to all the members who meet the criteria specified for a research investigation. This target group further provides a clear indication of whom amongst the social work population the study targeted.

The sample, which is a smaller, carefully chosen subset of the target group, is defined as a subset or elements of the individuals in the target population (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To ensure a comprehensive exploration of school social work practice, the study included three distinct categories of the participants' sample:

- i) School social workers or social workers providing direct school social work services to public schools,
- ii) Social work supervisors who support school social workers in their roles,
- iii) Key informants who manage school social work programmes at a provincial level.

Figure 2 provides a visual depiction of these three categories, which the researcher discusses in-depth in the subsequent paragraphs.

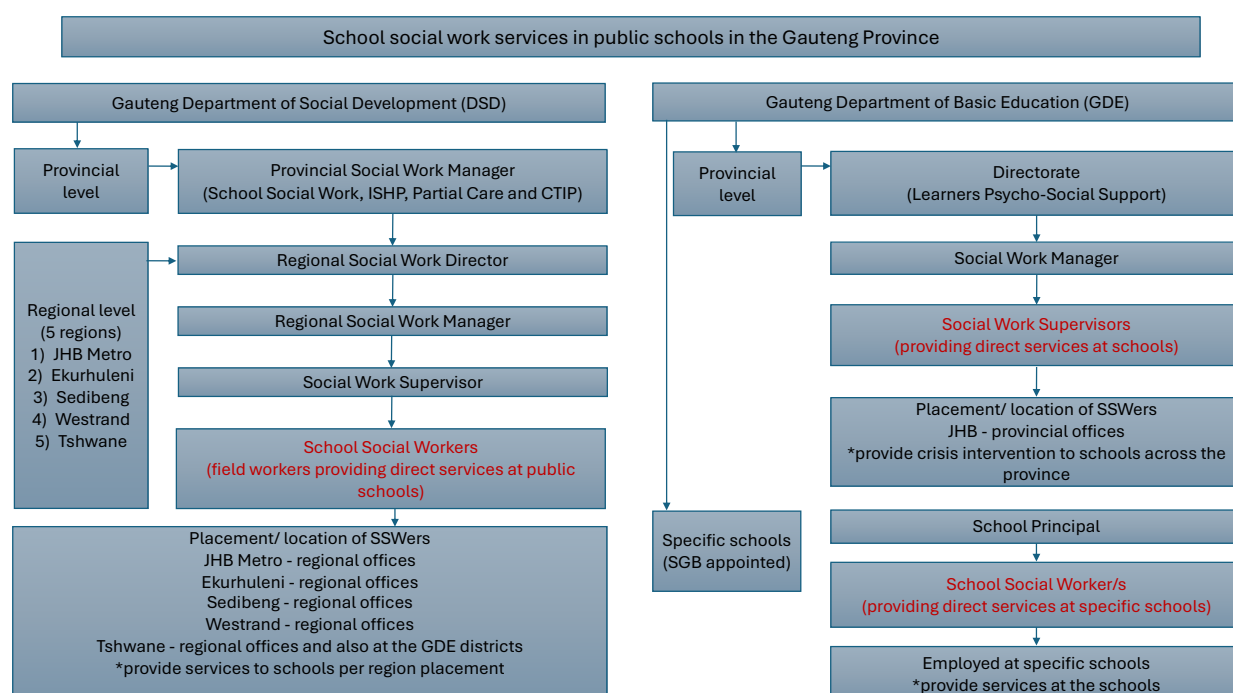


Figure 2: School social work structures in the Gauteng province

The current records from the DSD and GDE show that there are 122 social workers appointed explicitly by the DSD to service schools under the School Social Work programme, along with 20 social work supervisors providing direct supervision support to those school social workers and one social work manager responsible for coordinating the school social work programme (S. Madelle, personal communication, August 16, 2023). Under GDE, records it is indicated that there are four social work supervisors whose role deviates from traditional supervision despite their title, as they primarily provide crisis intervention to schools across the province, as well as one social work manager responsible for coordinating social work support in the province (E. Smith, personal communication, August 16, 2023).

Moreover, some school social workers in fee-paying public schools are appointed by SGBs in specific schools. However, there are no clear estimations of how many school social workers are appointed within this educational context. Given the study's focus on structured school social work services, the researcher chose to focus on the first category of social workers providing services in school settings, as they are formally tasked with supporting public schools in Gauteng province.

These social workers are referred to as school social workers in the context of this study as they are professionally employed within i) a School Social Work programme under DSD and ii) specific public schools. Moreover, they operate exclusively within the scope of school social work as described in prior literature (Chapter Two, under 2.3.1), and their inclusion ensures that findings accurately reflect the realities of the specific field of school social work in the Gauteng Province rather than general social work practice. The second category, social work supervisors was included as i) DSD supervisors providing supervision support to social workers servicing schools, ii) GDE supervisors providing crisis intervention support to schools. The third category, key informants, was purposefully included in the sample because they play a pivotal role in overseeing and structuring school social work services in the province. Their perspectives provide insight into policy implementation, service coordination, and systemic challenges.

Given the study's objectives, purposive sampling was employed, which Creswell and Creswell (2023) describe as a nonprobability sampling method where the participants are deliberately selected based on their relevance to the research question and aims. This method ensured that the study engaged social workers with direct experience in school social work within public schools, whether as school social workers, supervisors, or managers.

The inclusion criteria of the study were that the social workers should be qualified social workers who are appointed by the DSD, GDE, or SGBs at mainstream public schools to provide social work services to learners. The key informants had to be senior social work professionals, specifically managers appointed by the DSD or GDE, responsible for overseeing the delivery of social work services by the unit/sub directorate/component and/or to manage of the school social work unit to ensure that an efficient and effective social work service is delivered through the efficient and effective utilisation of human resources.

The researcher anticipated a minimum sample of 25 participants, as recommended by Korstjens and Moser (2017). This threshold aligns with Sandelowski's (1995) assertion that a qualitative research sample should be large enough to understand the phenomenon comprehensively, but not so large that it hinders in-depth analysis. However, following best practices in qualitative research, the researcher discontinued recruitment once data saturation was achieved at participant number 22. Data saturation, as explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985), occurs at the point when data collections no longer yield new information, ideas or insights. Table 3 outlines the biographical information of the study participants, in no specific order, and described thereafter.

Table 2 Participant biographical information

School Social Workers							
Participant pseudonym	Employer	Gender	Race	Qualifications	No. of years in school social work practice	No. of years in other social work fields	Accredited certification in school social work practice
1. Eleanor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW, Hons in Psychology	5 years	No prior SW experience	Completed
2. Enhle	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	5 years	No prior SW experience	Not completed
3. Khethani	DSD	Male	Black	BSW	9 years	2 years (probation officer)	Completed
4. Martha	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	5 years	No prior SW experience	Completed

5. Olivia	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	4 years	No prior SW experience	Completed
6. Sarah	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	3 years	2 years (auxiliary social worker)	Completed
7. Uthando	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	5 years	No prior SW experience	Completed
8. Tamia	SGB	Female	Black	BSW	4 years	No prior SW experience	Completed
9. Natasha	SGB	Female	White	BSW	2½ years	2 years (NGOs services)	Completed
10. Koketso	SGB	Female	Black	BSW	5 years	No prior SW experience	Completed
Supervisors							
Participant pseudonym	Role	Employer	Gender	Race	Qualifications	Number of years as a supervisor	
11. Emelda	Supervisor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW, MA in Social Work	9 years	
12. Grace	Supervisor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	12 years	
13. Linda	Supervisor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	5 years	
14. Naledi	Supervisor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	4 years	
15. Nnaketsi	Supervisor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	3 years	
16. Ursula	Supervisor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW, Hons in Psychology, Hons in Probation Services, MA in School Social Work	13 years	
17. Thabile	Supervisor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	3 years	
18. Wendy	Supervisor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW, Hons in Psychology	3 years	
19. Ayanda	Supervisor	DSD	Female	Black	BSW	4 years	
20. Muhle	Supervisor	GDE	Female	Black	BSW	5 years	

Key informants						
Participant pseudonym	Role	Employer	Gender	Race	Qualifications	Number of years as a manager
21. Nandi	Manager	DSD	Female	Coloured	BS, MA in Social Work	9 years
22. Faith	Manager	GDE	Female	White	BSW	22 years

As per Table 2, the final sample included social workers providing services in schools (n = 10), social work supervisors (n = 10) and social work provincial managers (n = 2). Among the social workers, the majority were employed by DSD to service schools under the School Social Work programme (n = 7), while others were employed by the SGB (n = 3). The social workers were predominantly female, racially categorised as black (n = 9) and white (n = 1). All social workers had baseline qualifications in a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and some with additional qualifications in Honours in Psychology (n = 1). The majority of the social workers had accredited certification in school social work practice (n = 9).

Experience in school social work practice ranged from 2¹/₂ years to 9 years, with an average of 5 years. The majority of the participants had no prior experiences in other social work fields (n = 7), others had experience in being probation officers (n = 1), auxiliary social worker (n = 1), and experiences in NGO services (n = 1). The majority of the social work supervisors were employed by DSD to act as supervisors to the social workers providing services in schools (n = 9), while the other social work supervisor was employed by GDE to provide services to schools as per crisis cases (n = 1). All supervisors were female and racially categorised as black (n = 10). All supervisors had qualifications in BSW (n = 10), with some having additional qualifications in MA in Social Work (n = 1), Honours in Psychology (n = 1) and a combination of Honours in Psychology, Honours in Probation Services, MA in School Social Work (n = 1). Experience as supervisors in their current roles ranged from three years to 10 years, with an average of 6 years. The provincial managers were both female, employed by DSD (n = 1) and GDE (n = 1) and racially categorised as coloured (n = 1) and white (n = 1).

4.4.2 Permissions and gaining access

It is important to gain access to research or archival sites by seeking the approval of gatekeepers, that is, individuals at the site who provide access to the site and allow or permit the research to be done (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Prior to approaching the gatekeepers of the study sites, the

study proposal went through multiple processes to be approved as a PhD study, and its ethical approval granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC (HSSREC/00006346/2023 – Appendix A). Permission was concurrently granted by GDE (Appendix B) and DSD (Appendix C) to conduct the interviews with the social workers placed in education systems and those currently supervising school social workers. The Figure below depicts the processes followed from the beginning of registering for the PhD in Social Work to gaining access to the research sites.



Figure 3: Process from PhD registration to gaining access to the research sites

4.4.3 Recruitment process

As depicted in Figure 4, upon receiving ethical clearance and permissions from GDE and DSD, the researcher reached out to the provincial managers for school social work programmes at GDE and DSD, requesting their assistance in disseminating comprehensive study details via email to employed school social workers that met the inclusion criteria. The researcher was already familiar with the DSD school social work provincial manager because of his previous involvement in their school social workers' short course training.

This greatly assisted in the recruitment of participants from DSD (Coyne et al., 2016). During the process of assistance, the DSD provincial manager sent an email to the social work managers at different Gauteng regions requesting a list of social workers interested in being study participants. To ensure anonymity, the provincial manager requested that the regional managers directly forward a list to the researcher with demographic details of social workers who indicated their willingness to participate in the study (i.e., name, position as a school social worker or a supervisor, contact cell number and email address, and number of years in school social work).

Recruitment at GDE was different in that the researcher arranged a presentation meeting with the coordinator and social workers at the provincial offices. At this meeting, the researcher introduced himself and his academic and career background and clarified the university where he was completing his PhD. The researcher further presented his research study in detail, the nature of the research work he intended to do and the overall purpose.

This presentation meeting was necessary for rapport building as Boxall et al. (2016) state that building trust, exhibiting confidence and respect, and establishing credibility are necessary. As a result of the presentation meeting, social workers who were part of the meeting and met the inclusion criteria indicated their willingness to participate in the study. Their details (i.e., names, contact cell number and email address) were collected at the end of the meeting.

Using the list of employed DSD, GDE and SGB potential participants, the researcher sent an email to the social workers thanking them for their willingness to form part of the study, introducing himself, the PhD programme he was doing and the university where he was completing it, and the purpose of the study. Additionally, the DSD and GDE provincial managers for school social work programmes were also invited to participate via email containing the same information. Consultations with the researcher's supervisors regarding this process happened concurrently as they provided him with in-depth guidance on ethical processes to adhere to while recruiting the participants. With all initial communication with the participants, the researcher further explained what their involvement entailed, which is described in detail in the subsequent section on data collection instruments.

4.4.4 Data Collection Instruments

Data collection in this study was done through interviews and document review.

4.4.4.1 Interviews

The researcher initially introduced the participants to this method of data collection in an email to them (highlighted in the previous session). He explained to them that their participation entailed being interviewed for the duration of 45 minutes to an hour. To facilitate the interview process, an in-depth individual interview guide was used for each participant group that allowed the researcher to elicit qualitative data from all the participants. Valenzuela and Shrivastava (2002, p. 4) explain that interview guides are useful in ensuring "that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee; this provides more focus than the conversational approach,

but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting the information from the interviewee”. The guides comprised open-ended and close-ended questions, therefore allowing the participants to respond freely with more options and opinions on the issues being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Furthermore, they consisted of participants’ demographic information and questions. The demographic questions were carefully considered following those outlined by Hughes et al. (2016) (i.e., gender, number of years in their current role, number of years providing services to schools and qualification). The rest of the questions were guided by the research objectives.

The interviews were conducted in person. However, the participants were given the option of participating virtually via Microsoft Teams (hereafter MS Teams). While the researcher managed to spend time with some participants who preferred in-person interviews (i.e., five participants), the majority of the participants opted for the Microsoft Teams option (i.e., 17 participants). Considering that the participants were located across different parts of the Gauteng Province, this method of interviewing was convenient for the majority of the participants and for the researcher.

It was convenient for them as they indicated some of the following reasons: 1) they were mostly situated at various schools providing services, 2) their day-to-day schedules were packed and could only accommodate the interviews early in the morning or after work, 3) virtual interviews could happen at any location. Personally, this method worked best for the researcher because he had relocated from Gauteng to KwaZulu-Natal due to work opportunities. In the inception of the study’s proposed data collection methods, he had imagined that the in-person interviews would be ideal for him and would give an opportunity to spend some time with the majority of the participants during the interview days, but this was not possible because of the relocation. All interviews that took place via MS Teams were recorded using the built-in recording option. Interviews that were conducted via telephone calls and in-person were recorded using a cell phone audio recorder.

Notwithstanding the logistical feasibility of using MS Teams for interviews, conducting interviews online may have influenced the quality of the overall data collection process. For instance, like Gumede and Badriparsad (2022), some of the participants could not sustain video connection due to network constraints and poor video quality. In other instances, participants joined the interview meeting at their workplace and were sometimes distracted by the presence of their colleagues. This was a limitation to using MS Teams as a data collection platform, and potentially influenced the participants’ responses and ensured the confidentiality of their

responses. Additionally, the virtual interviews limited the researcher's ability to observe non-verbal cues from the participants and draw richer observational data, their body language and contextual factors within their work environment, which could have provided more insight into their experiences. With these shortfalls, the virtual interviews were still beneficial to the use as they broadened participation and reduced geographical constraints. It is worth noting that measures were put in place to ensure that these barriers did not affect the quality of the data received. This included the researcher building rapport with the participants by providing details about their professional and personal background and also asking demographic questions to better understanding the participants. Participants were also informed about possible connection challenges and in instances where this happened, the virtual interviews were rescheduled. When participants were interrupted by work responsibilities while on the virtual interview, interviews were also rescheduled or paused.

4.4.4.2 Document review

In addition to the interview, a document review method guided by the READ approach was conducted (Dalglish et al., 2020). Document review is a systematic procedure used to review and evaluate documents in printed and electronic form (Bowen, 2009). Specifically, the researcher reviewed and synthesised documents that inform school social work practice in the Gauteng Province. With this method, the researcher intended to answer the following questions, 'What types of services are social workers expected to provide in school settings and to school-going children?'

As per the research question pertaining to the document review method, the researcher was particularly interested in how the documents inform the practice of school social work and how they confirm the contextual roles and responsibilities of school social work as reported by the participants (presented in Chapters Six and Seven). Guided by the READ approach by Dalglish et al. (2020), this desktop document review process sought to examine and interpret the included documents that inform the practice of school social work (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). The READ approach is commonly used in health and social science policy research, and the approach consists of four steps, namely: (1) readying the documentary material, (2) extracting data, (3) analysing data, and (4) distilling the findings. The subsequent sections provided a detailed account of how the first two steps were adhered to during this review, while steps 3 and 4 are described in the method of analysis (section 4.4.5).

4.4.4.2.1 Step 1: Readying the material

This step involves defining the parameters of the analysis. Based on the research question, Dalglish et al. (2020) explain that the parameters should clearly state the nature and the number (approximately) of the documents to be included in the analysis, the documents to be excluded and the sources through which the documents will be accessed and extracted. In this analysis, the research question was ‘What contextual and practice roles are social workers expected to fulfil in school settings or with school-going children? The development of the questions was influenced by the overall study aims and objectives on the practice of school social work, and to contextualise the practice of school social work.

The documents were identified in two ways: i) through some of the South African articles included in the literature review, which referenced key education policies, and ii) through a systematic desktop search for policy documents on the Department of Basic Education website. The DBE website was searched under the ‘resources’ and ‘policies’ tabs, which contained documents under different folders, including access to schools, school management, school funding, and curriculum and assessment.

Within each policy document under the different categories was searched for content that reflects psychosocial support services, social welfare support, and support and care for learners in education systems. Within each policy document, a keyword search was applied using the following terms: ‘social work’, ‘school social work’, ‘social services’, ‘social support’, and ‘psychosocial support’. The reference list of these documents was also searched in cases to identify additional documents. In addition, some documents not available online but known to the researcher were requested directly from provincial school social work managers. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the documents are discussed in the subsequent section.

Only documents reflecting the practice of school social work, social work services in schools, and social work services with school-going children were included. Documents that specifically relate to other practices of social work (i.e., probation, clinical and community social work) were not included. No limitations on the number of documents or publication dates were established. Although the type of documents as per suggestions by Dalglish et al. (2020) was not specified, the search only led to official documents (policies) and legal documents (i.e., laws, regulations, memorandum of understanding, and cooperation agreements) being included in the final review.

4.4.4.2 Step 2: Extraction of data

Relevant information from the documents included in this review was extracted into a data matrix presented in Table 3.1. The content of the documents was firstly analysed in terms of skimming through each document to identify sections that reflect school social work, social work services in schools, and social work services with school-going children. Once the researcher had confirmed that the documents reflected this, relevant information from the documents was extracted into a data matrix: i) Document (year promulgated), ii) Type; Author/s, iii) Intended audience, and iv) Summarised purpose of the document.

The categories in the data matrix were deliberately chosen for this study. The year the policy was promulgated provided insight into how policy and legal frameworks surrounding social work services for school-going children have evolved over time, while the document type clarified the nature of the document. Authorship of the documents was essential to consider as it highlighted the institutional source and clarified the developers of the documents. Details about the intended audience helped establish the key stakeholders meant to implement or be guided by the documents, such as social workers, teachers, school managers or principals, or educational officials. Finally, the summarised purpose of the document was significant as it helped clarify how the document conceptualised social work services with school-going children and within educational contexts.

4.4.5 Methods of Data Analysis

Data collected from the interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as guided by Braun and Clarke's (2023) analysis framework, while the document review data was analysed using the READ approach by Dalglish et al. (2020).

4.4.5.1 Reflective thematic analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis is an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in a given data set (Braun & Clarke, 2023). This choice of analysis methods was influenced by the overall aim of the study to explore the current state of the practice of school social work in Gauteng Province public schools.

Specifically, through the overarching yet specific research questions, the researcher wanted to report on the practice experiences of practitioners in the practice of school social work, identify

any potential facilitators and barriers, and solicit participants' perceptions on the training and education requirements of school social workers. In the discussion below, the six phases the researcher adhered to during the process of the analysis are outlined. Upon completion of the interviews, he transcribed them on a Microsoft Word document, which he imported to NVIVO (Version 14), a qualitative analysis programme used to help researchers manage data, manage ideas, query data, visualise data and draw reports from the data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019).

Utilising this qualitative software helped increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the analysis process. The analysis is based on an inductive approach as knowledge of the school social work services within South Africa, specifically in the Gauteng province, is limited (Lauri & Kyngas, 2005).

4.4.5.1.1 Phase one: Familiarisation with the data

As part of this phase, the researcher became deeply and intimately familiar with the content of the interview data from the different participant groups. This involved listening to the interview recordings, reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, and making notes of his ideas and thoughts regarding the data. For instance, some of the notes made during this process were on the general ideas about the participants' responses such as *'school social workers in the Gauteng Province seem to not only provide services to school and learners but also the parents'*, *'some school social workers seem to be placed within Department of Education and this has advantages and disadvantages'*, *'there is a lot of interprofessional and multidisciplinary collaboration'* and *'supervisors are providing services to school administrators'*

4.4.5.1.2 Phase two: Coding

Rossmann and Rallis (2011) define coding as a process for organising the data by bracketing chunks or texts and writing a word representing a category in the margins. In ensuring the phase, the researcher systematically and thoroughly worked through the datasets on the NVIVO software. As he was now familiar with the data, the researcher was then able to identify parts of the data which appeared to be interesting, relevant and meaningful for the research aim and questions. Once these were identified, he then put on code labels, which Creswell and Creswell (2023) refer to as analytically meaningful descriptions.

The labels were formulated through the use of both semantic and latent coding. Semantic codes can be recognised by their surface-level or explicit meanings in the data, while latent coding looks beyond the descriptive level of the data by uncovering hidden meanings or underlying presumptions, concepts, or ideologies that might influence or inform the descriptive or semantic

content of the data. Similar to Byrne (2021), this meant that the semantic code labels from the datasets were formulated when meaningful semantic information was interpreted, and latent code labels were formulated when meaningful latent information was interpreted. These descriptions or labels were based on the language presented by the participants, such as ‘*school social workers provide counselling to learners*’, ‘*social workers coming once a month to the school*’, ‘*teenage pregnancy groups*’, ‘*referral comes from schools*’, ‘*teachers don’t understand roles of social workers*’ and ‘*social workers ensure that learners don’t drop out.*’

These code labels took into consideration the suggestion by Braun and Clarke (2023) that codes should be concise yet contain sufficient detail to be able to stand alone and inform of the underlying similarity among component data items concerning the subject of the study. In Figure 5 below, the researcher presents a snapshot of the codes generated.

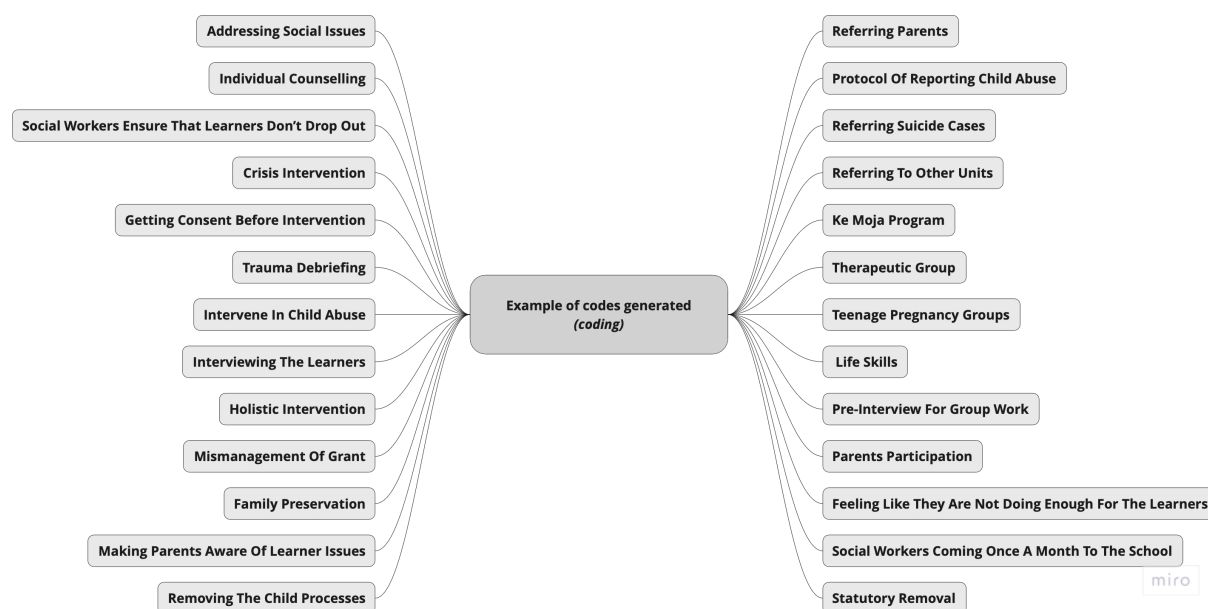


Figure 4: Mind map showing an example of codes generated

4.4.5.1.3 Phase three: Generating initial themes

As indicated by Creswell and Creswell (2023, p. 35), during this phase, the researcher aims “to start identifying shared patterned meaning across the dataset...compile cluster of codes that seem to share a core idea or concept, and which might provide a meaningful answer to [the] research question.” Here, the researcher shifted from looking at the data from an individual level to a broad level across the dataset or codes from all participant transcripts. As a starting point, the researcher found that it was important to create a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet for organising the codes. He

then grouped the codes based on their shared meaning to generate and formulate themes. The approach followed was both deductive and inductive analysis to generate themes from the codes.

Inductive analysis is an approach where themes and patterns are derived directly from the data itself rather than being imposed by pre-existing theories or frameworks. The researcher adopted this approach, "open-code" the data, meaning he assigned codes based solely on the content without fitting it into predetermined themes and categories. This allows for the emergence of themes grounded in the participants' perspectives and experiences, aligning with the study's theoretical frameworks of SCT, which prioritise the participants' viewpoints. Consequently, the inductive analysis provided a deep understanding of the data and can uncover unexpected insights.

In some instances, the deductive approach was used to identify themes based on the research objectives and previous literature. In light of this, it is crucial to note that the majority of the themes were formulated based on the content of the data and not necessarily on the researcher's ideas or preconceived coding frame. Below, a snapshot of how codes were grouped to map potential themes is provided. These initial themes were further refined in the next stage of the analysis, and an in-depth description of the process was well articulated then.

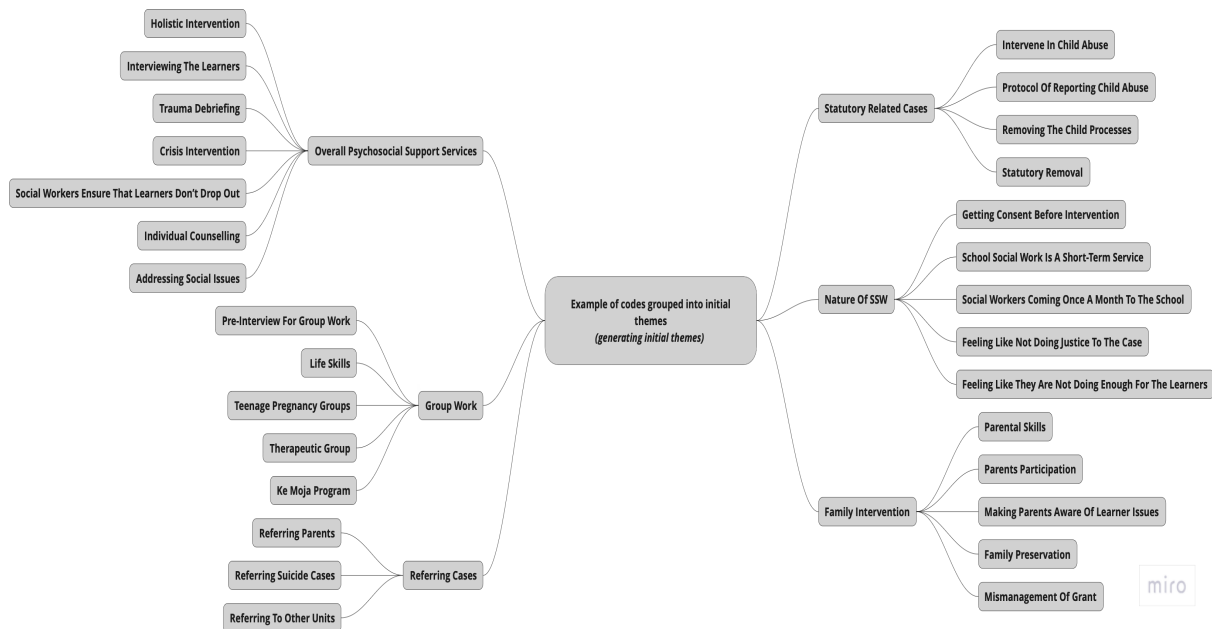


Figure 5: Mind map showing an example of codes grouped into initial themes

4.4.5.1.4 Phase four: Developing and reviewing themes

Creswell and Creswell (2023) explain that in this phase, researchers have the ultimate task of assessing the initial fit of the provisionally generated themes and the validity of the overall analysis by going back to the coded data items and the full dataset. The study followed two levels, as described by Byrne (2021) and Dawadi (2020). The first level involved downloading all codes and extracts from NVIVO, reviewing the relationship between code labels and extracts, and re-reading each theme to determine if they formed a coherent pattern.

The second level involved reviewing generated themes with the full dataset to ensure they provided a clear interpretation of the data, answered the study's research questions and accurately reflected the full dataset. During this process, new codes were identified; however, they did not significantly change the overall themes. Additionally, themes and subthemes were reviewed, renamed, interconnected and discarded during this process to enhance the analysis. The Figure below is a reflection of the outcome of this phase, which is an example of themes and subthemes developed.

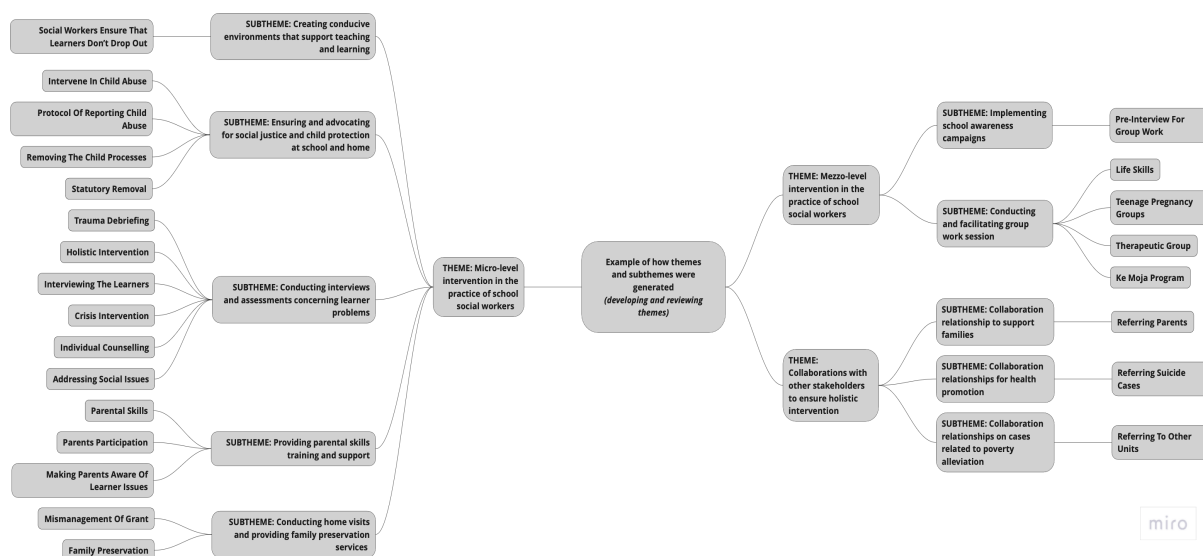


Figure 6: Mind map showing an example of the development of themes and alignment with some of the codes

4.4.5.1.5 Phase five: Defining themes

The analysis was then fine-tuned to ensure that each theme was clearly demarcated and built around a strong core concept and essence. Here, the researcher considered some key questions that Creswell and Creswell (2023) pose to scholars: i) what story does this theme tell? ii) how

does this theme fit into the overall story about the data? These questions were important in understanding and deciding on the themes in terms of refining, defining and naming them. Moreover, achieving this phase also meant that the researcher ensured consistency between the title of the themes with the subthemes, codes and the data extracts from participants. He decided to ensure that themes were not diverse and complex but rather concise, coherent and consistent. As a result, the final themes and subthemes are presented within the analysis and discussion in Chapters Six and Seven.

4.4.5.1.6 Phase six: Writing up

The final phase of the analysis involved the comprehensive writing of the research report detailing the findings. Creswell and Creswell (2023) put forth that the process of writing does not solely occur in this concluding phase; rather, it begins informally during the third phase of the analysis, where researchers informally engage in journaling and making notes of the data and the research process. This informal writing serves as a foundation that contributes to the final report within the current phase. The ultimate goal in this phase was to provide a detailed and thorough narrative of the dataset that answers the research aim and specific research questions posed in this study.

Consequently, the themes and subthemes derived from the analysis are systematically presented in Chapters Six and Seven, each organised in alignment with the corresponding research questions. In the reporting of these chapters, the researcher synthesised the findings by drawing on data extracts and developing discussions that integrate relevant literature. Moreover, this synthesis was further strengthened by incorporating the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, the existing literature, as well as findings from the document review.

4.4.5.2 Document review analysis

Subsequently, steps 3 and 4 present the analysis of the reviewed documents, following steps 1 and 2 presented in the data collection instruments section (section 4.4.4).

4.4.5.2.1 Step 3: Analysing data

To ensure that this step was completed thoroughly, the researcher started analysing the data during the data extraction step and informed initial thoughts and theories of the data. By the end of data extraction, a comprehensive picture of the content of each document concerning the objective of the overall desktop document analysis emerged. The researcher's initial thoughts as he thoroughly read through the different documents were that school social work as a practice is not referred to.

In most cases, social work services were described generally as working with children. This was not shocking to discover, considering that school social work practice is new in the South African context and new to the Gauteng province. The researcher also noticed that in policies related to education or specific to schools, social work services were not described in detail, therefore leaving one to self-interpret what could be meant by some of the roles and responsibilities indicated for social workers servicing schools and school-going children.

4.4.5.2.2 Step 4: *Distilling the findings*

This phase was reached when the document analysis process was completed. Specifically, this phase happened as the researcher reached saturation. This is only reached when a researcher fully or sufficiently understands the phenomenon they are studying. As such, he concluded the document reviews as the researcher had gained sufficient understanding of the content of each document and how it informed the practice of school social work. This is the ideal reason to conclude your review (Dalglish et al., 2020). However, it is worth acknowledging that there might have been documents that were missed during the researcher's search on the website and searches on the individual documents for additional documents. Nevertheless, the document analysis process was concluded because the documents read were sufficient to answer the research question confidently. The contents of the different documents are discussed in detail in Chapter |Five.

4.5 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

To ensure trustworthiness, the study was guided by Shenton (2004) and Lincoln and Guba's (2020) trustworthiness criteria (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability), which provide a framework for assessing the quality of qualitative research. In this brief yet detailed section, the researcher discusses how each strategy was considered in this research study.

4.5.1 Credibility

According to Stahl and King (2020), credibility seeks to explore how congruent the findings are with the reality and the experiences of the participants. The strategies used to ensure criteria included triangulation, prolonged engagement with the participants and through the investigator's authority. Credibility was promoted through triangulation, which is the use of several sources of information or procedures to collect data and to cross-verify findings (Stahl & King, 2020).

As such, a form of triangulation applied in this study was the use of a wide range of informants as the participants' group included practising school social workers, supervisors and managers in school social work services, and the use of interviews and document review methods. These participant groups helped establish varying viewpoints and experiences; ultimately, rich data was generated. Site triangulation is another aspect that was considered to ensure credibility. While the study was located within the Gauteng Province, the participants were from different regions and districts. Similar results on their experiences and perspectives emerged, therefore contributing to greater credibility (Shenton, 2004).

The researcher's background, qualifications and experience were also acknowledged. Shenton (2004) explains that these different outliers are important to consider as the researcher is the major instrument of the data collection and analysis processes. Therefore, in response to this suggestion to ensure credibility, the researcher had the required knowledge and research skills to perform his role during data collection, which were gained through the necessary ethics training, research experience and career practice to undertake this study. Lastly, in terms of prolonged engagements with the participants, while the researcher was not able to fully adhere to this, he was able to develop rapport with the participants during the initial contact when was introducing himself as a PhD student and negotiating interview times with them.

4.5.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the potential for the study to be generalised or transferred to other participant groups or settings (Ahmed, 2024). To ensure this strategy, Lincoln and Guba (2020) recommend that qualitative researchers provide detailed and comprehensive explanations about the research process to allow readers to evaluate how applicable the findings are to similar situations. In response to this recommendation, the researcher thoroughly described the research context, participants and methods used in this research study. The sampling methods used have also been described in detail, and justification for their choices and criteria used have been detailed. It is hoped that by providing these thick descriptions, readers and other researchers may be able to apply the findings to contexts and populations similar to those of this study.

4.5.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the extent to which the findings are consistent over time and across different contexts (Ahmed, 2024). Dependability is often used to show that if the research study were to be repeated in the same context with the same methods adhered to and the same

participants, the findings would provide similar findings outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 2020; Shenton, 2004).

To safeguard this, the researcher provides a detailed account of the methodological processes within this study to enable future researchers to repeat the work in similar contexts. In particular, the comprehensive account includes thorough explanations and justifications for the research methodology and designs, operational specifics for data collection, and analysis of the study. The researcher also included an in-depth review of the research project, in which he evaluates the efficacy of the methodologies employed in the study.

4.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings can be confirmed by other researchers, and this is established when the other three criteria have been achieved in the study. Polit and Beck (2012) add that confirmability is the extent to which researchers show that the findings reveal a range of realities and are reported fairly and faithfully. “Here steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work’s findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher.” (Shenton, 2004, p. 73).

Ahmed (2024) noted that different methods may be used to improve the confirmability of findings, including the use of peer debriefing and ongoing reflexive journaling. As such, the researcher relied a lot on peer debriefing with academic colleagues and experts in the fields of qualitative research and his research supervisors. Practically, this included seeking feedback and input, engaging in reflective exercises with the research supervisors about the study processes, and peer debriefing with colleagues. He also used a reflexive journal to record his perceptions, thoughts, ideas, personal biases, and reflections related to the study.

4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations are an integral part of qualitative research, necessitating researchers to proactively anticipate and address potential ethical issues throughout the entire research process, from the start of the research to the conclusion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bergin (2018) explains that researchers are responsible to their research participants and community and that in practising good research, researchers should consider all potential risks and ethical concerns before starting their research projects.

Taking this into account, as part of the initial steps to ensure that this research was conducted within ethical perimeters, the researcher received an ethical clearance certificate from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) (Appendix A); and Gauteng Department of Education (Appendix B) and permission to conduct the study from the Gauteng Department of Social Development (Appendix C).

Voluntary participation in research means that participants have the freedom to choose whether or not to take part in the study (Hogan, 2011). Participants should not be coerced or influenced and must be fully informed of the risks and benefits before making their decision. They also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and not answer questions they did not want to answer without explanation or consequences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Before the one-on-one interviews, participants were provided with the participant information sheet, which included these details (i.e., voluntary participation, right to withdrawal, freedom not to answer questions). The information sheet was also read to the participants in the initial individual interviews to ensure that they understood their self-determination to participate in the study. The researcher furthermore clarifies that no force was used to keep the participants in the study.

Confidentiality and anonymity are two important ethical principles in qualitative research that aim to protect the privacy and identity of research participants. While confidentiality refers to access to the participants' personal information disclosed during the process of the study, anonymity refers to the protection of the participants' identity throughout the research process (Bergin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). These two aspects were of significance to consider as Kang and Hwang (2023) outline that the strategies help establish good rapport and trust and assure participants of their privacy and security in participating in research studies. In instances where participants feel that their privacy has been established, participants become free and take control of the interview process. While both principles are interlinked and often difficult to discuss in silos, the researcher attempted to discuss them below to provide a clear outline of how both were ensured in this study.

To ensure confidentiality, all information received from the participants during data collection was kept in a password-protected computer to which only the researcher had access.. The final transcripts of the individual interviews did not include the participants' names or any identifying information. Additionally, all interviews were held in secure rooms and on an online platform to ensure that only the researcher and the participants were present, therefore ensuring confidentiality. The researcher found it difficult to ensure anonymity as the provincial

coordinators at DSD and GDE helped with sharing the information about the study and the recruitment process. As indicated under the recruitment section in this chapter, the coordinator requested that the managers directly forward a list with demographic details of social workers who indicated their willingness to participate in the study to the researcher (i.e., name, positions as a school social worker or a supervisor, contact cell number and email address, and number of years in school social work). Therefore, the managers knew who would participate in the study. Nevertheless, measures were taken to ensure that the information shared was anonymous. The researcher used pseudonyms as labels to the participants' transcripts on his computer and also used pseudonyms to report on their quotations in the results and discussion chapters. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts (i.e., names, regions or districts the participants worked at), and these transcripts were shared only with the researcher's supervisors.

Creswell and Creswell (2023) emphasise the importance of obtaining full, voluntary, and conscious consent from participants before conducting the study. This is through informed consent, a principle that the research participants should be allowed to make educated individual decisions about whether they want to participate in the study (Bergin, 2018). Considering that the participants were given the option to participate in the interview either face-to-face or online, two methods of obtaining consent were used: i) a formal document and ii) an online form. As per suggestions by Bergin (2018), the researcher obtained informed consent from participants by providing them with a detailed information sheet to educate them about the study and a consent form (Appendix D and E) to complete if they agreed: i) to participate in the interviews, ii) that any questions about the study prior to the interviews were answered, iii) that their participation was entirely voluntary, iv) that it would be audio recorded.

4.7 REFLEXIVITY

In this brief reflexivity section, the researcher detailed his PhD journey, reflecting on research experiences, who he is as a person and the influence of such on the journey. Where does one start? The researcher's journey began in the year 2022, when he had just completed a Master's degree. He had anticipated that upon graduation, he would desire to take time off from academia; however, this was not the case, as the outcomes of his master's degree left him with several questions regarding support services for learners in South African schools and potential strategies that might change the prevailing narrative in many public schools: students exhibit misconduct, underperform academically, display violence, and both learners and educators experience a lack of safety within the school environment.

These narratives were profoundly personal for the researcher due to his passion for the youth and the challenges they have to deal with since he had first-hand knowledge of being educated in a South African public school within an under-resourced and impoverished community, and understood the implications for the youth in this country. He has temporarily worked as a Life Orientation teacher in township schools for adolescent learners following his initial qualification (Bachelor of Social Work).

The researcher additionally acted as a mentor to secondary school students. This was undoubtedly a personal motivation for the decision to pursue this PhD. As such, it is important to acknowledge that he is a young black man who matriculated from an under-resourced community, a former teacher and mentor, and empathetic to the social issues of youth. Moreover, based on his high school teaching experience, he strongly believes in the need for social workers in school settings. In prior professional activities and personal dialogues concerning social work, the researcher has unequivocally articulated and argued for what he believes regarding the significance of social workers in educational institutions.

The researcher's initial enthusiasm for the PhD journey remained largely unchanged throughout, as he is a goal-oriented and ambitious individual. He believes that was also influenced by his desire to undertake a PhD, which colleagues and doctoral friends often told him is an important step in an academic career and is great for many reasons, including self-esteem, usefulness to society and contribution to scientific fields. Furthermore, the researcher was keen to gain a deeper understanding of school social work and methods to amplify the voices of field practitioners and ensure their recognition for the substantial contributions they make in South African public schools. During the completion of the proposal, this period was significant as he acquired extensive knowledge of the study topic from the literature. The methodology section helped him understand what it meant to undertake a PhD study and the depth and significance of the methods proposed.

The researcher often felt that his supervisors' guidance was impeccable, which made completing the proposal more bearable. Upon completion of the proposal, its presentation to colleagues at the Social Work Department, receiving permission of approval from DSD and GDE, and receiving a certificate of ethical clearance, the researcher experienced some degree of relief regarding his progress. This somewhat affirmed his purpose for pursuing a PhD, as he perceived that several stakeholders (academics, ethics committee members, and national departments) comprehended

the study and recognised its importance. One frequently contemplates the value of their writing and research proposals; this was his opinion prior to the endorsement and approval of his study.

The data collection stage of his PhD was emotionally, mentally and physically demanding. The researcher considers it emotional due to his relocation to another province for a lecturing position at a university in KwaZulu-Natal. He had to move away from family and friends who had supported him throughout his life and academic career. Emotionally, he perceived the relocation as purposeful, as he intended to dedicate most of his time in KZN to his PhD studies. Consequently, this necessitated frequent travel back to Gauteng for data collection when needed.

It was mentally demanding since the researcher frequently grappled with feelings associated with imposter syndrome, like many other PhD candidates and holders. Deconinck (2015) characterises this concept as the sensation of being a fraud despite one's triumphs, believing that all successes are really a result of chance and fearing that others would soon discover one's lack of true intelligence. It is widespread among doctoral students, as Nori and Vanttaja (2022) affirm that PhD candidates frequently question their capabilities and endure significant performance pressure.

However, how can one not feel like this, considering that the pressures of the PhD are intensified by the growing focus on competition, efficiency, effectiveness, quality, and the significance of groundbreaking research in university and scientific policy discourse (Brunila & Hannukainen, 2017; Deem, 2020). The researcher frequently had significant imposter syndrome perceptions when gathering data from the subjects. This sentiment may have stemmed from the concept of exploring a subject matter without actively engaging in the profession of school social work like the participants. He recognised this feeling and his position in the study.

Upon initiating data collecting and emailing all prospective participants, the researcher anticipated a quick response regarding their interest; nevertheless, he consistently had to pursue follow-ups with them. The participants from DSD were more willing to arrange interview data with him; while the majority of participants from GDE, despite his monthly follow-ups from April to September, did not respond to any of his emails. This disheartened the researcher as their participation as key informants would have contributed to the overall study.

Another challenge was the difficulty in accessing school social workers employed by SGBs, while managers had shared a list of potential participants and they had shared interest in participating, not all of them ended up participating even after I had followed up with them. The reluctance to

participate in the study might have been due to several issues, including competing time constraints or a lack of perceived understanding of the overall study and the relevance of the study to their day-to-day responsibilities. It might have also been due to potential participants feeling overwhelmed with the researcher's request for their participation.

The documentation of the study's findings from the acquired data also presented challenges. It was challenging since the researcher had intended to utilise Atlas.ti as a data analysis software, but was unable to do so due to its licensing requirements. Consequently, he had to utilise NVIVO, with which he was unfamiliar, but had access to software via the university library. The researcher's unfamiliarity with NVivo required additional time to develop proficiency in its use. Nonetheless, this procedure was engaging and valuable, particularly as he began to familiarise himself with the data and coding.

He had to continually remind himself of his stance during the data analysis, specifically his prior knowledge of school social work acquired through literature review, interactions with colleagues, and his previous research endeavours. This was the moment he recognised his substantial personal development as a researcher since he frequently needed to reflect on his stance as data emerged and endeavour to guarantee that his analysis accurately represented the perspectives of the data and participants. Maintaining a PhD reflexive journal also helped during this process, where the researcher would record his initial thoughts about the data, his perceptions and his observed personal biases.

Indeed, the support and encouragement of the researcher's supervisors and mentors were crucial, as noted by Nori and Vanttaja (2022). Practically, this was through research meetings to share his progress during data collection and analysis. This also meant that the researcher shared his challenges with them and sought advice where necessary. Honestly, without the encouragement and timely feedback on submitted work, the researcher believes that the PhD journey would have been more challenging. This support contributed to the researcher's overall development as a scholar as he also collaborated on the researcher's first publication work towards the PhD (Khumalo et al., 2024).

Moreover, in instances where the researcher felt 'stupid' as Deconick (2015) indicates as normal for PhD students, the researcher confided in his peers, those who had completed their PhDs and with one student peer in the same cohort with himself. This peer support helped as the researcher could share his doubts and worries to gain their insight. His relationship with a peer in the PhD cohort, who, as time went by, became a good friend helped him to stay the course of his research

as they would encourage each other and try to solve problems together. Overall, this support made the whole process a lot less stressful.

4.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the researcher comprehensively described the research methodologies employed in the current study. Specifically, he outlined the research design, approach, data collection procedures and analysis methods. To provide a clear picture of the context of the study, he also provided the details of the contextual location of the study, clear and detailed information about the participants and addressed ethical consideration matters applicable to the study. The chapter ends with a reflexivity section where he reflects on his PhD journey. The next chapter discusses South African documents that reflect and support the practice of social work in school settings and with school-going children.

CHAPTER FIVE: REVIEW OF DOCUMENTS THAT INFORM THE PRACTICE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN THE GAUTENG PROVINCE

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this section, the researcher synthesises documents that inform the practice of school social work in the Gauteng province. The section related to the first two objectives of the overall study, to explore the practice experiences of school social workers, and to explore the contextual factors that affect school social work practice in the Gauteng Province. Moreover, the section intends to answer the following questions, ‘What types of services are social workers expected to provide in school settings and to school-going children?’

As such, this chapter reviews the following documents: Children’s Act 38 of 2005, the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution, the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007, the South African Schools (SASA) Act 84 of 1996, the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS), the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP) and the Memorandum of Understanding on School Social Work (DSD and GDE).

These documents were analysed for content reflecting school social work or social work services in education systems or with school-going children. The findings from this synthesis are later triangulated with the empirical qualitative research in Chapters Six and Seven. The chapter first outlines the findings and discussions and synthesis, and then it concludes that there is a need for a clear description outline of social worker services in the included educational policies and in the MOU document.

5.2 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.2.1 Characteristics of studies included

Seven documents were identified for in-depth review. All documents were identified through literature and the Gauteng Department of Basic Education’s website searches. Four were legislation/ legal documents authored by the South African government, and two were policy directives, with one written by the Department of Basic Education and another jointly authored by the Department of Health and the Department of Basic Education. The last document is a memorandum of understanding between the Gauteng Provincial Departments of Education and

Social Development. All the documents were evaluated for their possible input or influences on school social work practice. The relevant information from the documents was extracted into a data matrix presented in Table 3 with the following details: i) Document (year promulgated), ii) Type; Author/s, iii) Intended audience, and iv) Summarised purpose of the document.

Table 3 Characteristics of documents reviewed

Document (year promulgated)	Author	Type	Intended audience	Summarised purpose of the document	Content related to social work services with school-going children/ in school settings
1. Children's Act 38 of 2005 (2005)	South African government	Legislation	Legal practitioners, social workers, child protection organisations, government officials, and policymakers involved in the care and protection of children.	To implement constitutional rights for children, set out principles for child care and protection, define parental responsibilities and rights, make further provisions for children's courts, issue contribution orders, make new provisions for child adoption, give effect to the Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption, prohibit child abduction and to give effect to the Hague Convention on International Child Abduction, to provide for surrogate motherhood, to create certain new offences relating to children, and to provide for matters connected therewith.	As outlined in Chapter 9 under Part 1, Identifying a child in need of care and protection. Section 150 (1-3) deals a child in need of care. If identified as needing care, social worker must conduct investigation on the case. If child is not in need of care and protection, then the social worker must provide various support intervention for the child, family, etc. Section 152 (1,2) deals the removal of the child to temporary safe care without a court order. The social worker can remove a child without a court order if the child is in immediate danger but must seek court approval within 48 hours. They are responsible for ensuring the child's safety, keeping them within the family when possible, informing the family of the reasons for removal, and providing a report to the court. Section 156 (1,2) deals with court orders to be aimed at securing stability in a child's life. The social worker must in a report provide details about the child's life, intervention and services provided, family preservation services, report on the permanency plans,

					placement plans and make a decision on whether the child stays with the family or is placed at alternative care, etc. Section 150 (1-3) deals a child in need of care. if identified as needing care, social worker must conduct investigation on the case.
2. The Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution (1996)	South African government	Legislation	Children, parents and caregivers, government institutions, legal professionals, social welfare services and support agencies.	Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution ensures that everyone, including children, has certain fundamental rights.	Chapter 2, Section 28 (1-4) deals with the rights of children. It ensures that every child has the right to a name, nationality, and family care or appropriate alternative care when removed from their family environment. Children are entitled to basic nutrition, shelter, health care services, and protection from maltreatment, neglect, abuse, and exploitation. The section also prohibits children from performing work that is inappropriate for their age or that could harm their well-being or development.
3. Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007	South African government	Legislation	Victims of sexual offenses, vulnerable groups such as children, law enforcement agencies, legal professionals, social services agencies and support organisations.	Aims to reform South Africa's legal framework regarding sexual offences by consolidating outdated laws and expanding definitions to cover all forms of non-consensual sexual acts. It enhances protections for vulnerable groups, particularly children and individuals with mental disabilities, and introduces new offences related to grooming and child pornography. The Act also	Chapter 5 Section 27: 'interested person' means any person who has a material interest in the well-being of a victim, including a spouse, same sex or heterosexual permanent life partner, parent, guardian, family member, care giver, curator, counsellor, medical practitioner, health service provider, social worker or teacher of such victim. Section 28 (3): An interested person must, when or immediately after laying a charge with the South African Police Service or making a report in respect of the alleged sexual offence, in the prescribed manner, be informed by the police official to whom the charge is made or by a medical practitioner or a nurse to whom the incident is reported,

				establishes a duty to report sexual offences, provides law enforcement with improved investigative tools, and creates a National Register for Sex Offenders. Additionally, it focuses on supporting victims by ensuring access to essential services and the right to request HIV testing of alleged offenders.	Section 30(1-2): allows a victim or an interested person to apply to a magistrate for an order requiring an alleged sex offender to undergo HIV testing within 90 days of the alleged offence. If the application is made by an interested person, it must include written consent from the victim unless specific exceptions apply (e.g., if the victim is underage or unable to consent). The application must confirm that a sexual offence occurred, that it has been reported, and that there is a potential risk of HIV exposure for the victim. Additionally, it should detail the relationship between the interested person and the victim if they are not closely related.
4. South African Schools (SASA) Act 84 of 1996 (1996)	South African government	Legislation	Government officials, schools, parents and learners, general public.	To provide for a uniform system for the organisation, governance and funding of schools; to amend and repeal certain laws relating to schools; and to provide for matters connected therewith.	Chapter 1, Section 1: “educator” means any person, excluding a person who is appointed to exclusively perform extracurricular duties, who teaches, educates or trains other persons or who provides professional educational services, including professional therapy and education psychological services, at a school. Section 4 (4.7.3): In cases of suspension and expulsion, placement in an alternative school setting, e.g., reassignment to another class, correctional education under supervision after school hours, a special school for learners with behavioural disorders, etc., are options which could be considered in conjunction with a school psychologist or a social worker.

5. Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (2014)	Department of Basic Education	Policy	Education officials, schools, educators, learners, parents and education stakeholders.	The purpose of the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) is to provide a policy framework for the standardisation of the procedures to identify, assess and provide programmes for all learners who require additional support to enhance their participation and inclusion in school.	The Department of Social Development services include social workers working within local communities and providing support to families and communities. In the case of children with disabilities, Care Dependency Grants are allocated through the Department of Social Development. Support for children in need of social grants. Other social welfare grants are available to families affected by unemployment and poverty, and social workers need to assist in this regard. The Department addresses the issues of child rights, safety and protection. District-based Support Services will collaborate closely with Social Services to ensure a seamless system of support to learners who experience psycho-social barriers and where the support required goes beyond school level. Social workers are part of recommended support services for children diagnosed with mental disability.
6. Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP) (2012)	Department of Health and the Department of Basic Education	Policy	Policymakers, health and education sectors, school administrators, and other stakeholders	To contribute to the improvement of the general health of school-going children as well as the environmental conditions in schools and address health barriers to learning in order to improve	Social assistance should include the Child Support Grant (CSG) is a key programme for alleviating child poverty in South Africa. Together with educators, social workers and the school community, school health services should ensure that orphans and other

			involved in child health and education, including school health teams and caregivers.	education outcomes of access to school, retention within school and achievement at school.	vulnerable children are identified and referred appropriately to psycho-social support services. Participate in Multi-disciplinary teams: District Based Support Teams (DBST) and School Based Support Teams (SBST) to support learners who experience barriers to learning and on matters related to psycho-social support services. Referrals for follow-up to other professionals or statutory interventions when required.
7. Memorandum of Understanding on School Social Work (DSD and GDE) (2021)	Gauteng Department of Basic Education and the Department of Social Development	Memorandum of Understanding	GDE officials at school, district and provision levels, and DSD officials involved in the School Social Work Program/ Unit.	The purpose of this Memorandum of Understanding is to establish and maintain an effective working relationship between the parties. The purpose is to further provide the means through which the Gauteng Department of Social Development and the Gauteng Department of Education will co-ordinate social work services to the high-risk children and families in managing social issues that impact on learners in schools and reduce social obstacles that can impede on learners' quality of social functioning to be served by	Emphasise the provision of psychosocial support services by social workers. Programmes related to supporting and protecting learners who have been exposed to sexual neglect/ abuse/ rape and orphaned/ vulnerable children, advocating for learners who experience teenage pregnancy, advocating against corporal punishment and educator abuse, and supporting school discipline and management processes. Provide programmes related to Debriefing and trauma counselling, rapid responses to incidences, and LGBTQI. Conduct programmes related to behavioural problems, crime prevention, substance use, bullying including cyber bullying. Addressing issues related to family break up/ divorce/ single parents, poverty, domestic violence, loss of loved ones and grief.

				the Department of Social Development's officials.	Facilitating life and social skills group. Conduct programmes on educating and empowering teachers with legislations on Children's Act and addressing school discipline and management issues. Conduct programmes on school discipline and educator abuse. Programmes related to harmful practices/ suicide. Addressing issues related to family break up/ divorce/ single parents, poverty, domestic violence, loss of loved ones and grief.
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A narrative discussion of the key contents from the documents is provided in the subsequent section under the two themes. The first theme is psychosocial support for vulnerable children, with the following subthemes: i) defining a child in need of social work services, ii) school social workers providing various psychosocial support services to learners, iii) school social workers collaborating in multidisciplinary teams. The second theme is statutory services, with subthemes i) removal of children in need of care and protection, ii) placement of children and reunification services.

5.2.2 Psychosocial support for vulnerable children

The review found that social workers were reported as significant practitioners in supporting learners and addressing psychosocial issues they experience during their school-going years. The subthemes presented under this theme include defining a child needing social work services, school social workers providing various psychosocial support services to the learners, and school social workers collaborating in multidisciplinary teams.

5.2.2.1 Defining a child in need of social work services

The definition of a child in need of care and protection is critical in understanding the broader implications of child welfare and protection policies and education policies that address children's wellbeing. In the review of the Children's Act 75 of 2005, Section 150 (1,2), it was noted that a child in need of social work services is any child that has been abandoned or orphaned without any evident means of support, displays behaviour that cannot be controlled by the parent or caregiver, addicted to dependence-producing substances without any support to obtain treatment for such dependency, exploited or lives in an environment that makes them vulnerable to being exposed which may harm them (i.e., physically, mentally, and social well-being), in a state of physical or mental neglect, being maltreated, abused, degraded by the parent or the caregiver, victim of child labour or a child in a child-headed household.

The Children's Act, Chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights, and the SIAS policy reiterate that children may experience child rights, care, safety, and protection issues. Specifically, SIAS policy outlines that children in need of social work services are vulnerable learners and those who are prone to experience learning barriers as learners in ordinary and extraordinary schools who are failing to understand due to obstacles of whatever nature (family disruption, language issues, poverty,

learning difficulties, disability, etc.), and children of compulsory school-going age and youth who may be out of school or have never enrolled in a school due to their disability or other barriers.

Chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights highlights that children are vulnerable to different forms of abuse. Therefore, their rights should be protected against abuses, and their fundamental rights should be achieved. Similarly, the MOU document reflects that children in need of social work services are those experiencing social, emotional, and behavioural barriers to learning, which may impede their academic function and developmental well-being. However, there are contextual parameters to this description of children needing social work services, and the MOU documents limit it to children in 'high risk' categorised schools in the Gauteng Province. Regarding a child in a child-headed household, the Integrated School Health Policy outlines that the children in such a household experience challenges mainly related to poverty, hunger, and various forms of abuse, with resultant absenteeism and school drop-out; therefore, they need social worker support services.

The content presented in the different documents, as indicated in the above section, provides a clear picture of children needing social work services, as evidenced in the papers, children in need of care and protection and those who are vulnerable and experience learning barriers. The description of the Children's Act emphasises the need for social workers to identify and support children who are vulnerable due to various unpleasant circumstances such as abuse, exploitation, abandonment, neglect, and exposure to harm in their home environment.

Reyneke (2020) supports this Act by putting forth that vulnerable children require special protection and that social workers specifically functioning within the school environment must ensure that they are protected against any harm they may be exposed to at all times. The SIAS policy and the MOU document complement the Children's Act by addressing barriers (i.e., emotional, social, and behavioural barriers) that hinder children's learning, especially those living with disabilities or affected by issues such as poverty, disruptive families, or in high-risk communities.

In support of this, Karimupfumbi and Dwarika (2022) echoed that the policy is intended to support those vulnerable children in Grades R-12, ensure that they receive equitable access to education and that their participation in the classroom is strengthened and improved. Similarly, the Integrated Health Policy builds on the idea that due to the issues identified in the Children's Act and SIAS policy, children are prone to experiencing hardship. At the same time, this may lead to absenteeism and drop-out at school; therefore, they need holistic support services. The provision

of this service is consistent with Shuro and Waggie (2021), who state that within the school environment and when supporting children, the policy addresses the various health and social barriers learners experience, improving their health outcomes.

5.2.2.2 School social workers providing various psychosocial support services to learners

The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32, SIAS policy and MOU document outline the services that school social workers should and could cover as part of their duties in the school setting. Specifically, The Criminal Law Act identifies social workers as ‘interested persons’ in matters of child sexual abuse and notes that they have a material interest in the well-being of a victim. Therefore, in their support of learners who may encounter sexual abuse, they are mandated to immediately lay a charge with the South African Police Service and make an official report of the sexual abuse. Considering that most school-going children are underage and, in some instances, are not able to provide consent, the social workers do not need to receive consent from the learner to report a sexual offence.

The MOU document does not consistently and explicitly provide a clear description of what each responsibility of the school social workers would be but notes that DSD, through its social work practitioners, would provide 29 programmes related to “early identification of psychosocial barriers, preventative, early intervention, education, therapeutic, crisis intervention and family support services for such clients as are referred by School District staff” (p. 4). As stated in the MOU document, these programmes (presented in Figure 7) would be provided by social workers through weekly school visits.

DSD programmes to be provided at schools		
• Rape/sodomy • Learners at risk of suspension or expulsions • Identification and assistance for Orphaned and Vulnerable children (OVC) • Developing and empowering educators with legislation relating to the protection of children such as the Children's Act 38 and Sexual Offences Act obliging educators to report child abuse and sexual offences against children • School discipline, educator abuse	• Family break up/divorce/single parents • Domestic Violence • Child neglect/abuse, assaults, exploitation, trafficking • Loss and grief • Xenophobia/racism • Debriefing and trauma counselling • Rapid Response to incidents • Mental health needs • Harmful practices/suicide/, • Behavioral problems • Crime Prevention • Gangsterism	• Substance Abuse • Facilitation of life and social skills • Sexuality and HIV/AIDS • Teenage pregnancy • LGBTI • Disabilities • Chronic illness • Referrals for follow-up to other professionals or statutory intervention when required • Planning and participation in learner camps • Harmful religious practices;

Figure 7: Programmes provided by DSD (School Social Work Programme/ Unit)

The content on the psychosocial support role, as outlined in the SIAS policy and the MOU document, highlights the complexity of the challenges that schools and learners face. Previous research has identified these challenges and supported interventions by social workers. For instance, mental health services reported in both documents suggest that the issue is prevalent among school-going children (Li et al., 2021b; Ajaero et al., 2018; Danielson et al., 2022) and school social workers are prominent mental “health professionals [who] play a crucial role in supporting learners well-being and meeting their learning needs” (Ding et al. 2023, p.1). This support, as evidenced in the MOU document, could include debriefing and crisis counselling.

The child protection programmes outlined in the MOU documents are consistent with previous research that indicates that social workers in schools are responsible for supporting orphaned children and ensuring school attendance (Ogina & Ramare, 2019) and that they have a role in empowering and training educators on referral processes, child protection, discipline, and classroom management techniques (Bulanda & Jalloh, 2019; Van Sitter & Wilson, 2018). Family and community issues programmes are essential as social workers can support families affected by family violence and family crisis (UBS Optimus Foundation, 2016), loss of loved ones (Shilubane et al., 2013), and low household income and poverty (Khumalo & Pretorius, 2024).

Programmes related to behavioural problems, violence at school (i.e., bullying, cyberbullying, gangsterism, crime rates), and substance use are advocated for by Maphalala and Mabunda (2014) and Masinga (2019). The Department of Social Development (2021) supports services by social workers in schools, as previous reviews in the department have shown that issues such as violence prevention and substance abuse were critical. Because of their prevalence in schools, urgent intervention was needed. Therefore, it signifies the establishment of the MOU document.

Lastly, school social workers in schools facilitate life and social skills for learners, supported by Chigondo (2019), who notes that it is part of the practitioners’ role in schools to address lifestyle issues and empower the learners with the necessary life skills. Programmes related to disability, sexual health, and identity need social work interventions (Bolin et al., 2017; Mosia, 2011). Other programmes included referring learners to other professionals for further interventions and statutory services where necessary, participating in learner camps, and addressing harmful religious practices.

5.2.2.3 School social workers collaborating in multidisciplinary teams

Although the SIAS policy does not provide an in-depth outline of social workers' roles, functions, and responsibilities, it does indicate that they have a role to play in providing psychosocial support to learners experiencing learning barriers. The policy captures this support as collaboration between DBSTs and social services professionals to “*ensure a seamless system of support to learners who experience psycho-social barriers and where the support required goes beyond school level.*” (p. 24). This collaboration is also emphasised in the MOU document as it states that collaboration that school social workers have to participate in is through multidisciplinary teams.

Specifically, the District Based Support Teams (DBST) and School Based Support Teams (SBST) aim to ensure the well-being of the child and/or family and improve the quality of life. Similarly, the ISHP outlines that social workers, in collaboration with teachers and the community, should ensure that orphans and other vulnerable children are identified and suggests that social workers should provide psycho-social support services for learners in grades R to 12.

In the collaboration partnership to support learners, the SIAS policy and the ISHP both indicate that the social workers from the Department of Social Development should assist children living with disabilities with care dependency grants and social welfare grants for those learners' families affected by unemployment and poverty, or experiencing financial difficulties. The SASA, Section 4.7.3, encourages collaboration between school administrators, psychologists and/or social workers when learners may be at risk of suspension, expulsion, or placement in alternative school settings such as special needs schools for learners with behavioural problems.

Boboyi (2024) and Khumalo (2023) support the collaboration as they recognised learning barriers to include, but are not limited to poverty, addiction to substance abuse, financial difficulties, instances of bullying, depressive symptoms, family disruption, experiences of sexual abuse, learning difficulties and occurrences of incestuous relationships. Addressing these barriers is within the arena of school social work through psychosocial support services (Huxtable, 2022; Ajaero et al., 2018).

Kim (2012) notes that through collaboration, social workers would be able to facilitate the realisation of learners' full potential and overall contribute to their development as responsible citizens in the broader South African context. Ogina and Ramare (2019) argue for support related to welfare grants and note that social workers should be involved in facilitating access to such grants. Khumalo et al. (2024) further note that the social welfare grant would help children and their families buy basic needs and contribute to their improved school attendance.

5.2.3 Statutory services

The analysis indicated that social workers are mandated to respond to statutory cases requiring children's care and protection. As such, the subthemes that emerged include removing children in need of care and protection, placing children in need of care and safety, and reunifying services for families.

5.2.3.1 Removal of children in need of care and protection

Where the removal of children from the care of their parents or caregivers is concerned, before the child is brought to children's court, the designated social workers must conduct thorough investigations within 90 days on whether the child needs care and protection. The Children's Act outlines that "the best interests of the child must be the determining factor in any decision whether a child in need of care and protection should be removed and placed in temporary safe care, and all relevant facts must for this purpose be taken into account, including the possible removal of the alleged offender in terms of section 153 from the home or place where the child resides, and the safety and well-being of the child as the first priority" [Section 152, (4)]. Assessments that explore the child's developmental, therapeutic, and other core needs should be conducted. Where necessary, the social worker should also indicate which measures related to family preservation have been considered, attempted, and provided

These measures should be taken to assist the family to care for the child, such as counselling, mediation, prevention and early intervention services, family reconstruction, rehabilitation, behavioural modification, problem-solving, or referral to another suitable qualified person or organisation [Section 150, (3)]. This process should be documented to ensure that whatever is prescribed forward considers what is best for the children, their stability, and well-being. In some instances (i.e., a child in need of care and protection who needs immediate emergency protection), the child may be removed without a court order, and should this be the case, the designated social worker should within 24 hours inform the parents or caregivers about this if they are readily traceable and report the matter to the relevant Provincial Department of Social Development [Section 152, (1,2)].

The above content related to removing children in need of care and protection, as outlined in the Children's Act, suggests the critical, robust roles that social workers play to ensure that all children are protected. Concerning school social work, Reyneke (2020) argues that practitioners should ensure that learners are protected and that they are not subjected or exposed to any maltreatment, abuse, neglect, exploitation, degradation, ill-treatment, violence, or harmful behaviour. As argued

by the law, the social worker has an undoubted responsibility to make the optimal decision on whether or not to remove the child from the care of their parents or caregivers (Nkosi, 2012). This removal should align with their responsibility to conduct interviews and assessments with the child (Chigondo, 2019) and conduct home visits (Cook, 2019) when child rights violations have been reported or identified.

5.2.3.2 Placement of children and reunification services

The Bill of Rights, Section 28, ensures that every child receives appropriate alternative care when removed from their family environment. Similarly, the Children's Act 75 of 2005, Section 156 (3) clearly states that the social worker is responsible for the placement, required care and protection ordered by the court. The removal may be temporary, with the designated social worker temporarily placing the child in safe care while providing reunification services to the child and their family. This further requires that the social worker engage the parents or caregivers to ensure that they comply with the requirements laid down by the courts.

This process should be well documented and provided to the children's courts for consideration. In cases where there is a possibility of the child being reunified with their family or caregiver, the Children's Act 75 of 2005, Section 157 (1,2) it is the responsibility of the social workers to investigate the causes of why the child was removed in the first place, provide intervention that addresses the cause and takes precautionary action to prevent the reoccurrence of such cases. Additionally, the social worker is responsible for counselling before and after the child has been reunited with their family.

In support of these sections within the Children's Act, Strydom (2014) explains that social workers help ensure that effective child protection services are provided through social work investigations, assessments, and interventions and that children receive the necessary support to thrive and develop to their fullest potential. The support that families are provided with in instances where violation of children's rights has been identified is important. As such, family conferencing or counselling services (Chigondo, 2019) may be provided to the parents and caregivers to assist them in better caring for their children once they have been brought back into their care.

Thompson et al. (2018) support this, arguing that the ultimate goal of supporting parents and caregivers during a family crisis is to provide them with the skills and training necessary to care for their children. Brook et al. (2012) and Sibanda and Lombard (2022) support this as they

explain that the reunification services, through home visit engagements, should be responsive and tailored to the needs of the parents, caregivers, and their children.

5.3 SYNTHESIS OF THE DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

The document summaries presented in the above section clearly illustrate that while school social work is in a new practice area within the context of the Gauteng Province, practitioners were supported by documents reflecting social work practice with children and practice within an education environment. The significance of these documents is that they inform practice regarding the various roles that social workers need to fulfil when engaging with school-going children and their families, as well as teachers.

They further highlight the importance of collaboration when servicing schools. The Children's Act and the Bill of Rights Section 28 reflected the overall need for social services and psychosocial support for school-going children. SASA Section 27 reflected the need for collaboration between school administrators, psychologists, and social workers in attending to learners with special needs or reallocating them to other schools. The SIAS and ISHP were all applicable to social workers providing services at schools, regardless of the practitioners' employer. They positioned the social workers as part of the educational system's collaborative partnership approach. Lastly, the MOU specifically addressed DSD social workers who provide various psychosocial and social welfare services to Gauteng schools.

Although most of the documents, except the MOU, were generic and explicitly referred to the functioning of the schools and practices with school-going children without a specific focus on school social work services, to some extent, they did provide some light in terms of what types of services social workers were expected to fulfil. A key gap identified in this review study within the educational policies (SIAS and ISHP) is that these documents lack explicit recognition of the distinctness of school social work or social work practices in basic education systems, which contributes to role ambiguity and inconsistent implementation of psychosocial support and social services in schools, therefore affecting school social work identity and scope of practice.

These documents, with suggested programmes for supporting learners, need to be strengthened at a national and provincial level to recognise the multifaceted roles that school social workers can fulfil in the school systems. When placed in a school setting, school social workers, as psychosocial support practitioners, are at a great advantage in making meaningful and impactful changes in schools, considering the contextual challenges many Gauteng schools face.

The MOU helped draw a picture of the services that DSD school social workers needed to provide, although some shortcomings were noted. Gauteng Social Development MEC Morakane Mosupye said in 2021 that the MOU was established “to ensure that schools receive psychosocial support to improve learning conditions, address social, emotional, and behavioural barriers to learning that impede learners' functioning and development. Notwithstanding, that we contribute to the overall well-being and academic performance of learners within a healthy, safe, and secure environment and have progressed positively.” (Department of Social Development, 2021, para.9).

However, this review highlights a significant shortcoming in the MOU: it does not provide a descriptive outline of the roles of social workers concerning the different programmes that they facilitate in school and with school-going children. As observed in the document, there is a lack of description of the exact responsibilities and unclear expectations of the social worker’s role in some instances. For example, considering the depth of mental health issues, such as those related to self-harm and suicide, the document does not clarify what is expected from school social workers in the school social work programme.

Other notable issues within the MOU document include the lack of clarity on harmful religious practices and what is expected of DSD school social workers or what is implied for their roles. The consequence of these vaguely described roles about the functions of school social workers with learners and schools is that it leaves room for confusion on practice roles. Specific to mental health and mental health disorders, the SIAS policy too vaguely states that they recommend that support be provided by school social workers.

5.4 CONCLUSION

The information presented in this section highlights that although the practice of school social work or social work services in schools may be an emerging and growing professional field in Gauteng schools, the reviewed documents reflect the roles of school social workers and, to an extent, inform the professional practice of school social work. The roles and services were clearly outlined in the legislative documents that were included. The MOU document provided a list of programmes and services that needed social workers to spearhead it; however, it lacked description in some instances. The SIAS and ISHP briefly documented the roles of school social workers but clearly outlined that they were part of the MDT for supporting learners. The next chapter presents findings and discussions on data related to the roles of school social workers in the Gauteng public schools.

CHAPTER SIX: THE ROLES OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE GAUTENG PROVINCE

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher presents findings related to the first objective of the overall research study, to explore the practice experiences of school social workers. Specifically, the chapter draws attention to multifaceted roles and responsibilities of school social work practitioners in Gauteng. In this chapter, including Chapter Seven, the data presented was based on interview responses from all participant groups and analysed using a deductive thematic analysis approach.

Moreover, the analysis was informed by the theoretical frameworks described in Chapter Three, the social constructionism theory and critical social theory, which suggest that practice knowledge is not discovered but created through social experiences and that practitioners need to critically engage with social systems, policies, and power dynamics that may contribute to inequalities, oppression, and marginalisation in educational settings.

6.2 FINDINGS

The findings are organised according to three themes, as outlined in Table 4: i) micro-level intervention in the practice of school social work, ii) mezzo-level intervention in the practice of school social work, and iii) collaborations with other stakeholders to ensure holistic intervention. Each theme has sub-themes.

Table 4: Themes and subthemes related to roles and responsibilities of practitioners in the practice of school social work

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Micro-level intervention in the practice of school social work	Subtheme 1.1: Creating conducive environments that support teaching and learning Subtheme 1.2: Ensuring and advocating for social justice and child protection at school and home Subtheme 1.3: Conducting interviews and assessments concerning learner problems Subtheme 1.4: Providing counselling and trauma debriefing to learners

	Subtheme 1.5: Conducting home visits and providing family preservation services Subtheme 1.6: Providing parental skills training and support
Theme 2: Mezzo-level intervention in the practice of school social work	Subtheme 2.1: Implementing school awareness campaigns Subtheme 2.2: Conducting and facilitating group work sessions Subtheme 2.2: Training and supporting teachers
Theme 3: Collaborations with other stakeholders to ensure holistic intervention	Subtheme 3.1: Collaboration as an important aspect of school social work practice Subtheme 3.2: Collaborative partnerships on cases related to child protection Subtheme 3.3: Collaborative partnerships on cases related to poverty alleviation Subtheme 3.4: Collaborative partnerships for issues related to behavioural modification Subtheme 3.5: Collaborative partnerships for the prevention of teenage pregnancy Subtheme 3.6: Collaborative partnerships for mental health support Subtheme 3.7: Collaborative partnerships to support families

6.2.1 Theme 1: Micro-level intervention in the practice of school social work

The participants described various roles and responsibilities of school social workers at the micro-level as they described their practice experiences. These roles and responsibilities are reported in this theme under the following subthemes: creating conducive environments that support teaching and learning; ensuring and advocating for social justice and child protection at school and home; conducting interviews and assessments concerning learner problems; providing counselling and trauma debriefing to learners; and conducting home visits and providing family preservation services.

6.2.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Creating conducive environments that support teaching and learning

This theme outlines that the ultimate mandate of school social workers in the school environment is to create a conducive school environment that supports teaching and learning. Most of the participants emphasised that their role was critical in addressing the diverse needs of learners and that their interventions allowed learners to focus on their academic work successfully:

“When the teachers identify the children with challenges, and then the social workers are involved, then I think teaching and learning will be much better, and the children will perform well.” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“The school’s main objective is to ensure good academics and that the children care about the curriculum. So by us attending and intervening, it somehow assists the child in completing the academics.” (Martha, SSW, DSD)

“We are there for the learners to be at ease and grab this opportunity of being a learner and that they do best in their learning and that they can pass at the end of the day.” (Enhle, SSW, DSD)

“If a child is stressed or if a child is abused, that child won’t be able to concentrate.” (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

“The one thing is that the school needs is to produce a particular pass rate, like last year, it was the first time we had 100% for matric. Also when a child cannot perform on an empty stomach” (Koketso, SSW, SGB)

“We need learners to be able to grasp or progress within their grade and ensure that they get the holistic support that we feel every learner requires. The school cannot achieve that without partnering with school social workers....” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

Other participants explained that issues faced by the learners, such as domestic violence experienced at home, affected the learners’ academic work and social and behavioural experiences. Therefore, they needed a holistic intervention that helped stabilise or bring about a balance between their personal life and home environment:

“So if issues such as domestic violence are not dealt with or the learner is not provided with support and assistance and the matter is not attended to within their home environment. The learner will find it difficult to concentrate or engage with learners, or

in some instances, and learners tend to project whatever behaviour is observed within their home with other learners. You find that they are now bullying and aggressive toward teachers and learners. So for them to progress and grasp the education they are being provided for, it needs to balance in terms of their home environment and whatever issues they are taking within their home." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

"If we don't get involved, these kids drop out. We ensure that that child's academic life is not disrupted. We ensure that we bring balance to the child so that the child doesn't drop out. We are trying to reduce the dropout rates of the children in schools; therefore, these kids will grow up, complete their studies, and become independent.... That's why our role as social workers is vital in ensuring the child's stability in their personal life so that their academic life does not get disrupted." (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

Linda (Supervisor, DSD) went on to indicate that without the necessary support such as school social work services, the children were at risk of not being able to take care of themselves and, therefore, would rely on the state for social support:

"When they drop out, the chances of caring for themselves are slim. Those kids will not always be independent but depend on the states. This is where you find families, young families coming to the department, they are looking for food parcels." (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

Ursula (Supervisor, DSD) noted that before the involvement of school social workers, educators would have to divert their attention from teaching to address the psychosocial needs of specific learners, which disrupted the teaching process. By having school social workers available to provide support, educators can concentrate on their primary role of curriculum delivery:

"The school social work program benefits the schools in that it also assists the educators in actually focusing on the curriculum. Before that, the educators will have to go to the School-Based Support Team (SBST) coordinator [who] will have to drive to the [social work] service point, leave the other learners, and attend to this one particular learner. So this program also supports educators to focus on curriculum, and they refer, and then we go to the school, and they then focus on what they are there for...." (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

Ursula (Supervisor, DSD) went on to express that the interventions and support provided by school social workers have contributed to improved academic performance rates in their districts.

“Even my district’s [academic performance improved] since we have intensified our psychosocial support to schools because we also focus on progressed learners, learners that are not performing well... We see improvement in my district; in particular, it has performed much better. It has climbed up to its performance. And I believe our services as social workers have also contributed partially, not completely, but partially to improving results for our learners and our districts.” Ursula, Supervisor, DSD).

The narratives presented in this subtheme highlight the critical role of school social workers in fostering a supportive learning environment that addresses the diverse needs of learners, ultimately enhancing their academic success. This is consistent with Huxtable (2022), who found that school social workers support learners’ positive educational success, especially those exposed to situations that make them vulnerable. From a SCT perspective, the narratives demonstrate how school social workers construct supportive learning environments through learner interactions. Mazzer and Rickwood (2014) note that while teachers must be involved in identifying learners needing intervention, taking time away from their mandated teaching roles to deliver learners to social workers may negatively impact their academic and administrative workload.

Moreover, Boboyi (2024) notes that the participant’s involvement in the school setting suggests that school social workers are vital in fostering positive school environments. Specifically, the school social workers employed by DSD and SGB emphasised that school social workers were essential for identifying and intervening in issues like stress, abuse, and domestic violence, which can hinder a learner’s ability to focus and perform in their academics. Lucas et al. (2015) support the need for intervention as they explain that issues of domestic violence, whether physical or emotional violence in the home environment, are significantly associated with learners’ violent behaviours in the school setting.

School social workers ultimately facilitate learning and academic achievement by recognising and addressing these situations that make learners vulnerable. In CST, practitioners in school social work services are required to critically analyse social systems, policies, and power dynamics that perpetuate marginalisation, inequalities, and oppression faced by specific groups in society, including learners, teachers, parents, and communities (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010; Leonardo, 2004). Moreover, their intervention to create conducive learning environments, as evidenced in the findings, is not merely about academic improvement but also about challenging social issues such as reliance on the state and unemployment of the learners due to school dropout and not finishing school.

The narratives further suggested that the participants recognise that learners are at risk of dropping out or not completing their academics if not holistically supported (i.e., considering the personal lives and family circumstances aspects) and that social workers were needed in schools to help bring about a balance in the learners' life experiences and their academic performance.

Out of the 11.6 million youth (7-17 years) in South Africa, it is recorded that there are 232,000 school-aged children currently not attending school (UNESCO, 2019). Therefore, this indicates that learners dropping out of school is a problem. The consequences of learners dropping out include, as evidenced in the participants' narratives that the young people and their families become dependent on the state for support (i.e., food parcels). This reliance on the state reflects South Africa's high unemployment rates, in which young people (15–24 years) account for 63.9% of those unemployed, and only 44% have completed secondary school (Desai et al., 2024; Statistics South Africa, 2021).

Critical social theory focuses on “sources of systematic oppression and the traces they leave in people” (Leonardo, 2004, p.13). In the context of the findings described in this section, similar to Finigan-Carr and Shaia's (2018) conclusions, it may be argued that school social workers' abilities and experience make them uniquely qualified to lead interventions directed to addressing inequalities that possibly lead to school drop-outs and improving the school climate and promoting social-emotional learning. As a result, school social workers in public schools ensured that learners academically succeed, reduced dropout rates and out-of-school children rates, and that teachers focused on their traditional role of teaching and supporting the curriculum.

6.2.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Ensuring and advocating for social justice and child protection at school and home

Throughout the discussions with the participants, they mostly stressed their position as necessary for ensuring social justice in the school, as reflected in this subtheme. Some participants explained that their role was to protect and advocate for learning and to ensure that learners were not discriminated against due to circumstances such as being pregnant:

“Our mandate is childcare and protection. We always say in our presentations to educators that I am paid to believe children. So when my social worker comes to your school, believe me, she will believe what the child is telling her because she is paid to believe and advocate for the child.” (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

“When a learner is pregnant, and they reach a certain period during the process of the pregnancy, some schools would request the parent to come to the school and sit with the girl in the class or be within the school premises so that should there be any pains or anything, the parent should then take over. However, this is not part of school policy. This has caused learners who are pregnant to drop out. We have a directive that we must keep a girl child in school even though they are pregnant. I’ve been to about two schools with a high number of pregnancies where they were practising this. I think they had about eight pregnant learners in February, and we had to tell them that this practice was not part of the policy and that what they were doing was wrong. We had to talk to them about their policies....” (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

Ursula (Supervisor, DSD) further explained the use of corporal punishment advocated against it and that in cases where teachers are found to have used this method of discipline, they were reported to the police:

“If an educator is exercising corporal punishment. I’m going to insist that the parent open a case against the educator because that is assault. The teacher has violated the law of the country, and a case must be opened against them ... this has reduced certain cases of corporal punishment, and they also understand that even if now we are taking action, it’s not personal; it’s mainly because we are doing our job.”

Other participants further elaborated on the context of abuse that children experience at the hands of their parents, caregivers, and families and how social workers actively work to protect the learners in these situations, as highlighted in the following extracts:

“Sometimes we have your absent parents, and sometimes the perpetrators are parents. So in those instances, we need to use the powers vested in us to ensure that we protect the children.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD);

“In a crisis, we are mandated by the Children’s Act that if the child requires care and protection, we have to intervene. For instance, we provide protection and intervention when issues such as physical, mental, and emotional abuse, and neglect are referred to us by the schools.” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“We ensure child care protection. The social worker does receive referrals for the children who need care and protection. We’re talking about children who are being neglected and abused, like physical, emotional, sexual abuse” (Khethani, Supervisor, DSD)

Where abuse is suspected or is reported, social workers would gather information and involve the relevant authorities such as the police and health care workers at clinics:

“If the child is being abused, we gather more information from that client. And if need be to involve the police, then we do that....If the child is physically abused or sexually abused, we take the child to the clinic so that the child can be examined and then the reporting form can be filed and the perpetrator can be arrested.” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

In some cases, the social workers were required to remove the child from the home environment due to the severity of the abuse or neglect. This is articulated in the extract below:

“If the child needs to be removed, we can remove that child.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

“If the school reports that the child is in danger, the preliminary investigation will be done, whereby they confirm if for sure the child is in danger or not. If they find out that the child is in danger, they will do what we call containment, where they are going to remove the child from danger through court processes. When removing the child from danger, they will go to the extent of confirming at the court that, for sure, the child is in danger and the child has to be removed.” (Sarah, SSW, DSD)

However, some participants emphasised that removal was considered a last resort, and the primary focus was on preserving the family unit whenever possible.

“We don’t just go there and remove the child, that’s because it’s being abused. We need to find out where the abuse emanates to see if we can mitigate and stop the problem. If there’s a perpetrator in the house, can the perpetrator be provided with services? So that they don’t do this because some of the families are not deliberately neglecting the children, but family issues that are causing that neglect. So our focus becomes to preserve the family.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“In a scenario where the school notified me that the mother was neglecting the child, I visited the school to do my assessment with the child and I found out that, although the mother is present, the only problem is that the mother neglects the child due to alcohol abuse. I opened a case against her and she was arrested for a weekend and released thereafter. When I went to see her on that Monday, she started opening up about needing help so that she can care for my child ” (Sarah, SSW, DSD).

In circumstances where all efforts to preserve the family had failed, the removal of the child from home was considered and the child was placed in temporary care (i.e., home, child care, family relatives, or volunteering community members), as noted in the below extract:

“But if in a position where we find that this family is beyond us to help, we remove the child and place them in temporary safe care while we find a permanent situation. A permanent situation may include reuniting the child with the family after we have helped the family, or finding other people who can care for the child such as family members or anyone in the community who is vetted. We have to vet these people against our child protection register as well to see if they are suitable to take care of the child.” (Martha, Supervisor, DSD).

Uthando (SSW, DSD) described how they would utilise an NGO that provides accommodation for mothers and their children who are victims of domestic violence:

“If there’s abuse in the family, and the mother and the children cannot continue to live with the perpetrators, I will have to find placement for the family in one of the NGOs that offers accommodations to victims of domestic violence. But that NGO only offers that kind of service for six months, after that the person who was abusing them will have to move out of that house so that the mother and the children can come back. Or I can motivate this mother and the child to stay for another six months because they cannot return to their home because of whatever reasons.”

The above narratives from the participants underscore the critical roles that school social workers play as advocates for social justice and protectors of children’s rights within the school and in home situations. Specifically, the narratives from the DSD participants suggest that school social workers safeguard children’s rights to access education by addressing unfair practices in the school setting such as discrimination against children for pregnancy and the use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline. This role is supported by the Department of Social Development (2019), Khumalo et al. (2024), and Matulayova and Pesatova (2013) as it is highlighted that school social workers have an ultimate human rights role which is to ensure that all children have access to care and protection services within the school setting.

The narratives further suggest that school social workers conscientise the teachers about social services roles in the school and the use of corporal punishment as a criminal act against the learners. This responsibility toward teachers is significant in South Africa as corporal punishment

is banned, and as evidenced in the narratives, any teacher who practices it should be reported to the police.

It may be argued that while contextual perspectives such as corporal punishment being an efficient and effective form of classroom discipline, as found by some authors (Heekes et al., 2022; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013), it has serious consequences for the psychosocial development of learners and overall positive school climate. Therefore, school social workers should actively engage school systems to ensure that school discipline is not done in ways that affect the overall social, physical, emotional and psychological development of learners.

The participants' advocacy role extends to the learners' home environments where they are statutorily mandated to intervene in cases such as child abuse (i.e., emotional, physical, sexual) and neglect (Herselman et al., 2023). In this regard, the DSD social workers are mandated by DSD to conduct investigations into the alleged abuse and where the child had been found to experience sexual and physical abuse, the police and healthcare workers were involved (Department of Social Development, 2019).

This is also consistent with Children's Act 38 of 2005 Section 150 (1-3), outlining that social workers should conduct investigations in such cases and provide the necessary intervention. The process of attending to child abuse cases is thorough as the social worker investigates what has been reported, the child's home environment, risk opportunities, and needs, and provides recommendations for care and protection plan (Department of Social Development, 2019).

Intervention services provided in cases of abuse, as indicated by the participants, include family preservation services where they support families and parents care for their child, removal for the children and they would be placed in temporary care (i.e., other family members, close community members) with people who have been vetted and identified and would care for the children. Family preservation services are supported by Strydom (2014), who emphasises that school social workers should assist families in developing coping mechanisms needed to support and care for their children in instances where child neglect is identified. Moreover, the narratives on child removal are consistent with Nhedzi and Makofane (2015) and Sections 150, 152 and 156 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, explaining that when the home environment is deemed unsafe for the child, the school social worker should remove the child and place them in alternative or temporary safe care.

Critical social theory considers the acceptance of issues such as violent disciplinary methods as social oppression lived by many children who may be regarded as problematic learners and whose bodies were ostracised from the general student population (McDade, 1992). Through the social constructionist lens, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that meanings are socially constructed and often institutionalized, passed through interactions. As such, it may be argued that the narrative regarding corporal punishment can be understood as a reflection of how knowledge and practice around discipline have been socially created and sustained by teachers and in educational settings, and these are not objective truths. School social workers, in this sense, have the ultimate role as social change agents to challenge these socially constructed practices and, through their support in education systems, provide alternative constructions of child discipline that prioritise child protection. In their role, they should ensure that corporal punishment is understood as a violation of children's human rights and that discipline is practiced in non-violent ways.

6.2.1.3 Subthemes 1.3: Conducting interviews and assessments concerning learner problems

This subtheme outlines a key aspect of the school social worker's role: to conduct interviews and assessments with the learners identified as having problems with school social work support. These interviews and assessments are intended to ascertain the problems and difficulties faced by the learners by gathering relevant information:

"We do intake in social work following the referral procedure to check the significance and the essence of the case. Thereafter, we move to what we call an assessment which will determine whether or not this case needs crisis intervention, therapy, psychosocial intervention, or family preservation. So the assessment will usually inform the action or plan we need to take." (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

"So anything and everything that hinders the child from progressing within their studies is considered a barrier and is then referred to us, social workers, to come and interview. We go and attend to cases that have been reported, the school social worker will then request to see those learners so that they can have one-on-one interview sessions with them." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

"When school social workers are assessing, they use the generic screenings and assessment tools to identify whether this child requires their support. So based on the outcome of the assessment, the social worker will determine whether the child needs

psychosocial support or needs to be removed from home, or there's a need for family preservation services." (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

"We are responsible for the identification of learners who require school social work services" (Muhle, Supervisor, GDE)

Similar to the conclusions by Van Sittert and Wilson (2018), the above responses from the participants suggest that whenever learners were identified by the school, the teachers would refer to school social workers for support, therefore making the practitioners a starting point for assisting with learner problems. Section 150 (1-3) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 also requires that child abuse cases be referred to social services and that social workers have the ultimate role of investigating them after referrals.

However, not all these identified problems needed school social work intervention, and in some instances the referrals lacked clear details about the problems. This is why the participants reflected that school social workers would then conduct interviews and assessments with the learners, also to ensure the appropriate intervention. In conducting the interviews with the learners, the findings further suggest that school social workers must navigate the delicate balance between maintaining the confidentiality of learners and ensuring that the relevant stakeholders are informed as necessary (Raines, 2021).

Moreover, one participant's responses indicate that school social workers were required to assure the learners of confidentiality of what they share and careful consideration of the reporting process and the level of detail provided to different stakeholders, while always prioritising the protection of the learner's identity and privacy. Ensuring confidentiality is a cornerstone of social worker-client interactions and serves as a foundation for a trusting relationship between them (Segal, 2023).

As such, Zengin (2018) puts forth that the social worker is required to maintain confidentiality throughout the service they provide. This would then contribute to the learners feeling comfortable in disclosing their most private experiences and challenges. The narratives also suggest that although GDE social work supervisors were referred to as supervisors, they provided fieldwork services where they would intervene in learner situations flagged by the schools by assessing the learners' needs for social work services.

6.2.1.4 Subtheme 1.4: Providing counselling and trauma debriefing to learners

Based on the conclusions from the interviews and assessments, school social workers would then provide counselling services to learners who were found to require psychosocial support, as apparent in this subtheme. Some participants expressed that counselling was dependent on the identified issues:

“When we go to school depending on the matter that they have presented we go there to offer counselling.” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“So in terms of individual cases, social workers provide services like counselling and therapy as most of the children experience behavioural problems.” (Martha, Supervisor, DSD).

Enhle elaborated on what school social workers probe in the counselling interventions:

“For example, if the school has referred the learner to a social worker, a case requiring counselling, it’s important to check the child’s psychosocial well-being first. What is the problem? Do you have any influences on this problem? Who are their support systems? Who is relevant or who has contributed to ensuring that you overcome this challenge” (Enhle, SSW, DSD).

In situations where the learners were referred to school social work interventions following traumatic incidents (e.g., death of school personnel, dealing with grief, accidents), several participants reported that school social workers provided trauma counselling which they referred to as trauma debriefing:

“For instance, let’s take grief or loss. You then focus on grief, the grief stages where you try to help the client understand why they are angry. Do they understand why they’re in shock? Do they understand? So we get into a deeper understanding of the problem. you are unpacking the problem so the child or the learner can eventually cope with the matter or find healing.” (Enhle, SSW, DSD)

“If maybe there is a teacher or learner who passed away, we offer a group trauma debriefing session...If maybe there is a death in the school, then we go there and offer traumatic debriefing sessions with the learner in school.” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“I do emotional support for learners if they experience a trauma incident or maybe a child was in a car accident or over the weekend there was trauma. I then do trauma debriefing”
(Natasha, SSW, SGB)

“There was an incident this morning that needed containment... the social workers went to assess what's the need, and then they will go again to do the counselling and trauma debriefing, and make appropriate referrals” (Faith, Key Informant, GDE)

Moreover, Eleanor (SSW, DSD) highlighted the complexities involved in providing trauma debriefing, especially for a young school social worker. They explained that in some cases, they would request the assistance of more experienced colleagues to help navigate the sensitive nature of these situations:

“Considering that I am young, I felt like talking with the parents might be challenging because they are devastated. So I requested colleagues who had 10 years of experience to accompany me so that they could assist me with the case. Then I was able to deal with the young ones and offered them traumatic debriefing sessions”

The above narratives from the participants indicate that counselling took the form of either individual counselling or trauma counselling (also known as crisis counselling or trauma debriefing) (Kjellgren et al., 2016). The narratives suggest that the counselling was provided to support learners' psychosocial well-being, explore their challenges, help them develop a deeper understanding of their emotional responses to grief and loss, and help them cope with certain circumstances that they face (Chigondo, 2019; Kjellgren et al., 2024).

The narratives also show that GDE supervisors provided direct counselling and support to learners following trauma incidents in the school setting. This role contradicts the traditional role of a social work supervisor, as reflected by Gumbi et al. (2024) and the Department of Social Development (2021). Nevertheless, the narratives by school social workers are supported by Van Sittert and Wilson (2018), who note that school social workers play a significant role in supporting learners who experience traumatic or grief-induced incidences.

Similarly, Chigondo (2019) reported that school social workers have a role in providing support intervention services in crises such as those highlighted by the participants in this study. This role is described in the MOU for school social work services between DSD and GDE, noting that DSD social workers will provide debriefing and trauma counselling. They are required to provide counselling and individual support to vulnerable learners, such as those who identify as

LGBTQIA+. Moreover, through the lens of CST, this intervention may be understood to respond to a personal source of oppression, which scholars (Leonardo, 2004) note as individual experiences of oppression, such as family dynamics, behavioural problems or interpersonal conflict, which have real pain.

However, when considering the challenges, practitioners have to consider the broader social context in which these experiences occur. Social workers, through counselling and trauma debriefing, may be responding somewhat to CST as the intervention is aimed at developing a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of the personal oppression that learners experience and working towards devising strategies to ensure that their environment is more just and equitable. Moreover, counselling can be seen as an opportunity for the learners and school social workers to re-construct meanings attached to grief, loss, trauma, and pain, giving these experiences different interpretations. As such, the role of social workers in this counselling process and the language that they use to support, unpack and de-construct the learners' experiences are significant.

6.2.1.5 Subtheme 1.5: Conducting home visits and providing family preservation services

This subtheme reflects the role of conducting home visits and supporting families to address the challenges faced by learners. Although all participants seem to have shared acknowledgement of this role, some had varying experiences with the contextual nature and processes of conducting home visits. Some participants emphasised that after the initial interview with the learner, the school social workers would often conduct home visits to assess the home environment and engage directly with the parents or caregivers. As a result of this, then the school social worker would have an understanding of the type of intervention that is required to support the learner and their family:

“After the interview with the learners at the school, I would conduct a home visit to assess the home circumstances and interview the parents about the issue that the school referred for investigation.... If maybe the child doesn't want to go home, the parents will be called. If the mom is at home, then I will immediately conduct a home visit and explain that the child doesn't want to go back home and explore what is happening at home.” (Emelda, SSW, DSD)

“And after the intake, I conduct a home visit where I investigate the child's circumstances and investigate more regarding the case to determine what further intervention is needed

regarding that specific case.....Sometimes, we have family mediation or conferences with the parents and the child if they don't have a good relationship. So we just to get both sides of the story on what could be raising these issues. (Martha, SSW, DSD)

"So after assessment, if there's a need for the home visit and support families, that's when the school social worker will do a home visit and do the family assessment and provide support there." (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

Uthando (SSW, DSD) described that they initiated the family-related services on the school premises and thereafter they would conduct home visits as part of the family preservation interventions whereby they check the safety of the child and investigate if the child has been abused:

"The first family counselling session happens at the school and the second one happens at home because I also need to do a home visit to assess home circumstances and check on the family structure, the family composition, and how many people are there in the household. Also check safety precautions on whether the children are safe, whether there are any threats in the household, or whether are there any individuals who are abusing the children. So those are the things that I check when I do home visits."

Other participants expressed that home visits were conducted as per the identified challenge that the learner is faced with (i.e., issues around school uniforms and absenteeism). Consequently, the home visits allowed them to identify practical challenges faced by families, such as issues of poverty or lack of resources, which may not have been evident from the initial referral:

"Sometimes you find that the school is complaining that the learner is not properly dressed or comes to school dirty, so when the social worker conducts a home visit they find that it is not because the mom doesn't want to wash the learner's uniform, but it is an issue of poverty and that mom does not have the money to buy washing powder. So in some cases, they wouldn't know this information, even from doing the individual interview so that is why they do home visits." (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD).

"If there is an issue of absenteeism, we would want to know why the child is mostly absent, whether the parents are aware of this, or is there a challenge at home. We would engage the child and their families." Enhle, SSW, DSD)

“School social workers will need to do the home circumstances assessment to see if maybe the challenge that has been reported from the school does not stem from the home environment. So if the investigation proves that there are challenges within the home environment. They will then work with the family to ensure that whatever challenges have been identified within the home environment, they work together to improve those current circumstances.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

School social workers also play a role in addressing issues related to the misuse of child grant allowances by parents or caregivers. This is explained by Eleanor (SSW, DSD) that part of their responsibility involved intervening when they encountered situations where the child grant funds were not being used appropriately:

“Sometimes there’s mismanagement of social grant funds. Firstly, we speak with the mother regarding the pros and cons of misusing the grant, and we try to guide her on how to use the grant because maybe she doesn’t use the grant well. And then even maybe she continues mismanaging the funds, then that’s when we request SASSA to assist us in transferring the money to a person who can be able to take care of the child and provide financial support.”

These responses from the participants related to school social workers conducting home visits and providing family preservation services suggest that school social work services expand beyond services to the schools and learners within the school environment. Rather, considering that learners’ identified problems may be linked to family and home circumstances, home visits are instrumental following reports by the school and the learner of child abuse and neglect, absenteeism, and an unconducive home environment (Cook, 2019; Winter & Cree, 2016).

This particular role and services are noted in the SAIS, ISHP and MOU documents as school social workers are identified as significant in providing support to families, addressing family issues such as family break-ups or divorce, and domestic violence, and support through social assistance programmes like care dependency grants and child support grants. Regarding social grants, the SIAS policy explicitly notes that social workers should support children in need of social grants and that the services may extend to assisting the family unit with other welfare grants in circumstances where the families are affected by unemployment and poverty. The ISHP also notes that such services should be provided by social workers and are aimed at alleviating child poverty in the South African context.

Lynch (2017) further supports these findings as they indicate that home visits are a common requirement for client assessments and that these visits are inherent in the practice of social work because of the need to understand the systems in the child's life and to understand them in their environment. Home visits, as found in this study, promote and facilitate communication between the home and school environments (Allen & Tracy, 2004).

Kelly (2010) argues that school social workers can listen to families, link them to resources, and assist in coordinating activities between the learners' home and school environment, therefore contributing to parents' involvement. The next sub-theme relates to efforts for family preservation, which would help to ensure that families are supported. The provision of home visits may also be linked to various theories central to the field and practice of social work such as the systems theory, person in environment and ecological theory (Lynch, 2017; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). These theories consider the learner in relation to their environment and place significance on the individual and family systems and how they interact, function and influence each other (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013).

Similarly, the SCT may be used to unpack the need for home visits. As such, based on their practice of assessing and investigating the home circumstances and interviewing the parents or those who live with the learners, the school social workers are practising what social constructionism theorists regard as practitioners understanding the realities and knowledge of their service users from their viewpoint. The school social workers assess the home circumstances through observations and engagements with those in the household to gain a 'complete' picture of their realities and how their knowledge has been shaped by their social home environment.

Moreover, they may take a collaborative stance, which Flaskas (2011) argue to be fruitful as the practitioners construct knowledge with the service users through conversation. Another SCT argument put forth by Sterian and Mocanu (2016) highlights the importance of domestic knowledge or rather the knowledge that children develop from their home environment, in shaping their overall psychosocial development. They argue that this knowledge gained at home is fundamental for everyone and contributes to strong relationships, informed decision-making skills, and leading a fulfilling life. Therefore, the latter signifies the imperative responsibility that school social workers have in understanding the home circumstances of learners in need of social services intervention.

6.2.1.6 Subtheme 1.6: Providing parental skills training and support

School social work services included the social workers ensuring that parents were supported with the necessary skills and training they needed to better care for their children, as evidenced in this subtheme. Some participants reflected that school social work services also play a significant role in providing parental skills training and support to families, recognising the importance of strengthening parenting capacities to support learners' academic and personal development:

“The support that we give to their families is parental skills support because some families are not equipped and are not informed on how to raise their kids, and it becomes a frustration academically for those learners.” (Sarah, SSW, DSD)

“I do parenting skills training where I provide parenting guidance and educate parents on parenting style, skills, how to create better relationships with their children, and also how to support them in the academics and linking how good relationships also affect their children’s academic performance.” (Olivia, SSW, DSD)

“A lot of times we experience a lack of parental involvement where learners are concerned so we provide parenting skills. Remember that with support, the individual can ensure that they self-actualize.” (Enhle, SSW, DSD).

“I organise support groups for parents from similar areas, like squatter camps or RDP housing. These support groups cover topics such as domestic violence, the importance of education, and recognizing changes in children’s behaviour. Through these groups, I often identify individual parents who need further intervention.” (Koketso, SSW, SGB)

Emelda (Supervisor, DSD) also noted that the parenting programmes were used as a platform to raise awareness about mental health issues and address any misconceptions surrounding them, as explained in the below extract:

“There are parenting programs so that parents become aware of those issues because parents don’t know that there are issues of mental illness and are not familiar with issues related to it. They will just say the child is misbehaving, or that the child is stubborn, only to find the child has mental issues. I think when they are attending a parenting program, that’s when they learn more from other parents or social workers.”

Other participants reported that through parental programmes, school social workers “wanting to guide the mom on how to look after the child” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD), that parents were also

engaged in school platforms (i.e., parents meetings) whereby *“Whenever the school is having meetings with parents, the social worker will also go and also present our services and also to conscientise them about child abuse.”* (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD), and that *“we have done evening information sessions with the parents on suicide prevention and to guide them”* (Natasha, SSW, SGB)

The narratives from the participants in this subtheme illustrate the previously discussed objective by school social workers to preserve families. As such, their role is to provide parents with practical help with key skills needed to parent their children and provide them with the necessary support (Vseteckova et al., 2022) to enhance their parenting. From an SCT perspective, in this role, school social workers are not only transferring knowledge about effective parental support mechanisms but are also helping parents self-actualize and actively reshaping their understanding of what it means to be supportive, present, and responsible parents (Şahin, 2013). With this support, parents may be able to “cultivate [their] children’s interest in learning and learning habits through educational participation and behavioural support for their children, thereby affecting children’s academic achievement” (Li & Qiu, 2018, p. 19).

The provision of awareness of children’s rights and parental skills programmes are supported by Vorster and Le Roux (2024) as they state that these programmes can be presented at schools in which a holistic approach can be taken to address issues such as access to health care, mental health support and even address socio-economic factors experienced by parents and their children.

Additionally, these programmes may strengthen parenting skills for creating a conducive home environment for their children, therefore, supporting their development, and psychosocial and educational well-being (Republic of South Africa, 2006). In the following theme, the researcher discusses findings related to the roles and responsibilities of school social workers at the mezzo level, as experienced and perceived by the participants.

6.2.2 Theme 2: Mezzo-level intervention in the practice of school social work

In addition to micro-level intervention, the participants indicated that school social workers provided intervention at mezzo-level. This meant that the intervention was administered to groups of people. As such, the subthemes in this theme include implementing awareness campaigns, facilitating group work with learners, and training and supporting teachers).

6.2.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: Implementing Awareness School Campaigns

School social workers had a significant role to play in schools by conducting awareness campaigns and implementing projects to address various social issues affecting learners within the school context, as presented in this subtheme. The participants reported on this and that the school social workers would first conduct needs assessments to identify the prevalent social issues and trends impacting the schools and learners:

“We identify trends in our schools. For instance, there are schools with a high number of bullying cases, and teenage or suicide cases. Once we have identified the schools that have a lot of these cases, we will work with the school administrators to provide awareness programs based on what is happening and the trends that are happening in the schools.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD).

“In terms of awareness programs, the social worker will assess the school to see which services the school needs.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“We first assess with the SBST coordinator to check which program can benefit the school. We don’t use one approach to say an approach fits all the schools.” (Olivia, SSW, DSD)

The social workers would then design and implement various awareness programmes and campaigns based on the identified needs. These campaigns covered a range of topics, including child protection, child abuse and neglect, bullying, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and sexual and reproductive health:

“Most of the programs that the school social workers normally do are awareness of substance abuse, different types of bullying, and remember, social behaviour change programs, GBV, child abuse, and sexuality.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“The school social workers render prevention programs at schools mostly about child protection issues, child abuse and neglect, and society. They give presentations on bullying and anti-bullying, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy as we have high teenage pregnancies.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD).

“We also do the sexuality in terms of reproduction, like a girl’s and a boy’s body matured, what are you going to experiment, what are you going to experience as they get older. Like the reproduction development..” (Olivia, SSW, DSD)

Thobile (Supervisor, DSD) emphasised that the school social workers worked closely with others in the Department of Social Development to design and implement these awareness campaigns. They also leveraged national celebrations and events, such as Child Protection Week, to further amplify their messaging.

“There are different celebrations that we are doing within DSD which we raise awareness on. For example, there is Child Protection Week now. The school social workers go to different schools, raising awareness and giving information to learners on how to be safe, how to be protected, how to report cases when they experience abuse ...”

Similarly, Wendy (Supervisor, DSD) and Martha (SSW, DSD) echoed that raising awareness on child protection was necessary so that the learners were aware of what abuse looks like and processes to follow in cases where they experience some form of abuse:

“These programs raise awareness for the learners and with others, you find that they go through abuse at home but they are not aware that they are being abused. so when you do such programs, you make them aware that This is not normal treatment from the parent, this is abuse...” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

“We’re also doing child abuse awareness, like the protocols on how to report abuse because previously you will find that a child has been maybe sexually abused, but they don’t know that they need to go to SAPS, they need to go to clinics or those protocols, because most of the time you find that they are unable to assist the learner, especially with the case because of the evidence is already gone. So with the protocol awareness, we’re trying to avoid or minimize that.” (Martha, SSW, DSD)

In addition to child protection, another participant indicated that school social workers also ran campaigns to educate and empower learners with knowledge about their rights and responsibilities, as explained by Grace: *“And then we also assist with educating the learners about their rights and responsibilities....And we are using, for example, the Children’s Act and the School Act. The other acts used are based on the issues that come from that particular group as the different schools have different needs.”* (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

The above narratives from the participants suggest that school social workers have the responsibility to organise and facilitate awareness programmes addressing various issues faced by learners. These programmes were organised according to the needs of the specific schools, and

the school social workers had to conduct needs assessments to identify issues that would be central to the programmes.

This is consistent with Gaffney et al. (2021) who argue that this strategy for identifying school programmes may be used for effective campaigns as it provides a rationale for the theme of any awareness programme. As evidenced in the narrations, awareness programmes developed and facilitated by the school social workers were related to bullying, anti-bullying, teenage pregnancy, sexuality, sexual reproductive development, and children's rights and child protection. These topics are prevalent in South African public schools (Khumalo, 2023; Ngunyulu, et al., 2016; Pretorius, 2020) and consistent with Al-Rasheed et al. (2021), who state that school social workers developed programmes to enhance health attitudes and behaviours of adolescent learners. Ding et al. (2023) highlight that such social work intervention programmes with groups may help create a positive learning environment and promote a healthy school culture and class climate.

Child protection was highlighted as another focus of the awareness programmes with the intention of conscientising the learners on their rights as children in the South African context. Specifically, the school social workers relied on Child Protection Week to raise awareness of children's rights as articulated in the Children's Act of 2005 and aimed to ensure the safety, well-being, care, and protection of children through an integrated multi-disciplinary approach (South African Government News Agency, 2024).

SCT offers a useful lens to understanding the role of implementing awareness campaigns as it highlights that knowledge and realities are socially constructed through language, interactions, and shared meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Through awareness campaigns, school social workers not only disseminate information but also create opportunities for learners and teachers to collectively construct meanings around social issues such as bullying, child protection and sexuality issues. CST lens in educational contexts highlights the importance of quality education where learners are provided an opportunity to become aware of social injustices (Leonardo, 2004) or pervasive issues in society that can lead to the violation and marginalisation of others. As such, it may be argued that school social workers through these above-stated awareness campaigns, aim to conscientise learners about personal and school issues and ultimately challenge them to actively work against these issues (i.e., bullying and child protection).

6.2.2.2 Subtheme 2.2: Conducting and facilitating group work sessions

This subtheme outlines school social workers' role of conducting and facilitating group work in the school setting with the learners. Similar to awareness campaigns, the group work interventions were tailored to address the specific challenges faced by the learners as identified from the conducted needs assessment of the schools:

"We also do groups which are also it's therapeutic and depend on the need that has been identified. The school may send a group of learners, or based on our needs assessment, we'll conduct a therapeutic group." (Olivia, SSW, DSD).

"So group work is mainly based on a need assessment, which most of the time will be based on my caseload or maybe the educator that I work with will just tell me that they a certain problem in the school and there's a need for, let's say maybe for bullying, and then that's when I will create a group for that specific group of learners." (Martha, SSW, DSD)

The participants reported that group work sessions that school social workers facilitated focused on a range of social topics such as substance abuse and addressing behavioural problems. Ultimately, the groups ensured that learners have the life skills needed to help them cope with their psychosocial challenges, as highlighted by the following participants:

"We render different topics related to life skills in terms of substance abuse. We have a unit that deals with substance abuse, but we sometimes find those learners who are not severe or maybe they're still in an experimental stage in terms of substance abuse. So we provide them with skills on how they can change their habit before it can tend to a serious problem or before it tends to be a therapeutic problem..." (Martha, SSW, DSD).

"We have learners with other behavioural problems, and they might not be the same behaviours, but to ensure we provide the necessary support and information, school social workers group them and provide life skills groups." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

"Then we also do life skills. Life skills [session] are also different and are based on the school's needs." (Olivia, SSW, DSD)

"So another thing that school social workers, they are doing. They are doing group work. When I talk about group work, you can talk to a support group as well as an educational group. You can talk to all the groups that will make the child to be okay at the end of the day." (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

Moreover, the participants reported that groups were conducted to address bullying and educate learners about it and that these groups could be with learners who are victims and perpetrators of bullying:

“So I also do groups which can be groups for bullies. I can have a group with learners who have been bullied or offended at school. Groups depend on the needs of the school, therefore, if there are a lot of bullies, then I have to do a group of bullies.” (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

“Bullying as much as we would like it to stop, in schools, it is our mission to raise awareness and educate learners on how to combat bullying or ensure that they can strive in such conditions; it’s very important.” (Enhle, SSW)

Some participants also reported that the school social workers would use the group sessions to address school issues related to teenage pregnancy, discuss pregnancy prevention, and provide a platform for affected learners to support each other. The following extracts report on this:

“Let’s say maybe I go into a school and I find that there is a challenge of teenage pregnancy. Maybe more learners are getting pregnant and then that’s when I will start a group and engage with those learners I form a group and they give each other support within the group and I educate them on how to prevent this problem from happening again in the future. It’s like a form of awareness that, okay, we did this, we are here, and how to fix it, or how to live with it.” (Sarah, SSW).

“But mostly now because of the issue of, especially during COVID, there was an issue and there was a rise, spike of teenage pregnancy. Yes, as a result, we formed a support group. Remember identifying those learners who got pregnant and even those who already gave birth to offer them support in terms of how are they coping as new mothers, as teenagers... So we group them in other ways. And then we, what do we call, we offer them support in that sense, you see. They need to share their experiences in terms of how are they coping, but also empower them to see in terms of skills, give them skills, how can they cope as mothers.” (Khethani, SSW).

As part of the groups, Khethani (SSW, DSD) reported that they would educate the pregnant learners on important legal and procedural information, such as the concept of statutory rape and the process of filling Form 22, and information on foster care and adoption services:

“Others we help them in terms of doing Form 22s, filling Form 22s, because remember, some of them they were, they don’t understand what is the statutory rape, so we educate them in other ways to see if your boyfriend is older than this age in terms of their sexual offences act. You know, you must know that this person must report all those things. We educate them in terms of that.... Even foster care we can consider, and also adoption for some of them”

Other participants further indicated that there was a specific group for learners with substance use challenges:

“For learners who are abusing substances, so they group them to partake in group work sessions with those learners.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD);

“There is a program called Ke Moja under the Social Development Department. It has a great CD that has these short stories on substance use education. Kids used to love that... will go to the schools where I’ll be able to do a projector and just project that in front of the learners. Then they will listen to that. It’s a five-minute to 15-minute short clip on that. Then after that, I will ask questions and you’ll see how they interact. It’s fun for them to do that.” (Linda, Key Informant, SDS).

“The Ke Moja program covered modules on how to prevent drugs... [school social workers] talk about drugs with children under the age of 18.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

The above narratives suggest that school social workers provided intervention to learners in group settings and the support was tailored to the needs of the learners. Lindsay and Orton (2014) support this role as they indicate that social workers should, through group work, help individuals meet their needs and influence personal, group, organisational, and community problems. The narratives show that school social workers provided therapeutic and psycho-educational or guidance groups. Psycho-educational groups are the most often used groups in schools for both preventive and first-line intervention for at-risk adolescents (Vera & Reese, 2000).

Gerrity and DeLucia-Waack put forth psycho-educational to teach specific skills and coping strategies to prevent problems (i.e., anger management, social skills, self-esteem, assertiveness, and making friends), as evidenced in the participants’ responses. The overall purpose of these groups was to address issues of bullying, substance use, child abuse, and teenage pregnancy. In some cases, school social workers used and followed the Ke Moja programme to facilitate the group, a substance abuse prevention programme used in schools (Khosa et al., 2017).

From a CST perspective, group work in educational contexts is imperative as learners have access to discussions that question the existing social order and assumptions (Amineh & Asl, 2015). These critical engagements facilitated by the social workers help learners understand the complexities of their lived social experiences and empower them to question the *status quo* in their immediate communities. It is through this facilitation role in group work that Onore and Lester (1990) note that genuine learning and change can occur for the learners.

6.2.2.3 Subtheme 2.3: Training and supporting teachers

The social workers would conduct workshops and training sessions for teachers, as apparent in this subtheme. These sessions aimed to enhance teachers' ability to recognise the signs of psychosocial problems in adolescents, respond effectively to these challenges, and appropriately refer learners to necessary care and support services. The following extracts reflect on this responsibility:

"The social workers would equip educators with skills and tools necessary to identify vulnerable learners to refer them properly." (Muhle, Supervisor, GDE)

"As a social worker, educators want me to train them on how you approach learners with problems and I do." (Koketso, SSW, SGB)

"We hosted the training last year for the teachers that focused on trauma and handling of trauma in your classroom." (Natasha, SSW, SGB)

Some participants reflected that they capacitated and encouraged the teachers to complete Form 22 for reporting child abuse:

"We are trying to empower them by running workshops with them to say, let's meet on this particular day so that we run a full workshop on how to compensate each other, especially when it comes to Form 22s. They say this thing of calling Form 22, remember when you get a child with rape, a child who's raped, then a child who's neglected, a child who's physically abused from home or anywhere. So we are trying to capacitate them on that." (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

"The role that is constant is that every time there's a new SBST, the social workers [supervisors] must make sure that as part of their training, they make the SBST aware of child protection protocols, whereby if there is child abuse, they need to report it using form 22 and encourage compliance with this such legislation." (Faith, Key Informant, GDE)

“So school social workers, they go there and give information to educators to say, if you’re having a problem like this, how do you report it? Like the educators or SBST coordinators, they will advise to say, you know what? When you are referring, do the referral, and do the form 22. As you know, Form 22 is one of the legal documents of social development, which allows the social worker to go as far as removal.” (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

The responses from the participants echoed in the above subtheme reflect that school social workers have a responsibility towards educators, and they must share and empower them with information on the processes of reporting cases of child abuse (Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018). These responses are supported by Khumalo and Pretorius (2024), who argued that school social workers' training was necessary for teachers to recognise and respond to psychosocial challenges effectively. As indicated by the participants, the workshop training and information-sharing sessions with teachers were centred around reporting the administration and referral processes for child abuse cases. This is consistent with Vieira et al. (2014), who put forth that as part of teacher training it was significant to capacitate them about when and where to refer learners who are experiencing psychosocial challenges.

6.2.3 Theme 3: Collaboration with other stakeholders to ensure holistic intervention

This theme delves into the critical role of collaboration in the practice of school social work and reflects how partnerships with various stakeholders are essential for effectively addressing the complex challenges faced by learners and their families. As such, the subthemes reported on are as follows, collaboration as an important aspect of school social work practice, collaborative partnerships on cases related to child protection, collaborative partnerships on cases related to poverty alleviation, collaborative partnerships for issues related to behavioural modification, collaborative partnerships for health promotion, and collaborative partnerships to support families.

6.2.3.1 Subtheme 3.1: Collaboration as an important aspect of school social work practice

This subtheme outlines the significance of collaborative partnerships between school social workers, other service providers, and professionals. This partnership was significant given the limited number of school social workers in Gauteng public schools and the vast number of schools

they serve and that because of this lack of resources for manpower, they couldn't reach all schools as required, as noted:

"Currently the practice of school social work is a joint responsibility with other stakeholders such as DSD, Partners, NGOs because GDE cannot execute/ support GDE Schools alone" (Muhle, Supervisor, GDE)

"So as you will agree with me in Gauteng, we've got a lot of schools, but with 117 school social workers, then with this number, we are unable to reach all the schools. Hence we work interactively so with other units and with other organisations and even with our health and Correctional Services, EMPD, all those governmental departments and NPOs" (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

Collaboration relationships seem significant as some of the participants reflected that together with other service providers, school social workers would plan for the type of services or interventions to be rendered in the school. This eliminated problems such as duplication of services or interventions and clarified the roles of the different service providers:

"If maybe in some instances, our internal and external stakeholders will approach this goal on their own, it becomes a problem because from where we stand, we are never sure in terms of what content was shared with the learners. If we work together, we know what content and if a case arises from there, we know where to base our intervention because of what information was shared prior." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

"... currently or last year, what we tried to do, was to link with both external and internal to ensure that we know one another and we know exactly who does what and if there is a need for one because not all the schools are allocated to school social workers." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

"... when we go there, sometimes you want to run the services, they will say no, you can't run another particular service because already we got somebody who came and like for instance, when you say you want to give a talk in suicide or teenage pregnancy... You get there. The services are already there, you see." (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

Other participants further reported that the collaborative partnerships allowed for brainstorming ideas and solutions around the services needed by the school, and generally share input on issues

affecting learners. In some instances, these partnerships became effective during forums and meetings with different stakeholders involved in education:

“When we plan programmes or any services, we share ideas to say what, to what extent, the schools' needs are in terms of their view as organisations. Then we come up with a plan to say, to run a certain program, to do the what is the best programme that is relevant” (Martha, SSW, DSD).

“We also attend the stakeholders meetings where there are different professions from different organisations to see how can we work together in assisting the learner.” (Martha, SSW, DSD)

“If not, we also have our meetings as ESS, comprising of the supervisors from DSD, the supervisor, Thato, and the ESS team to say these are the issues that were identified by GDE in the schools and from our side and try and come up with solutions going forward.”* (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

“So it's two different meetings that we have, that the feedback will speak to the cases, the awareness and other the issues, and social workers are involved within that meeting.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

“We do also have the district forum where we also meet and discuss the issues that affect the learners.” (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

The narratives from the participants strongly emphasise the significant role of collaborative partnerships between school social workers and other service providers and networks in addressing the multifaceted challenges and needs experienced by learners in Gauteng. Apart from the employment by SBGs, school social work practice is unique in the province, with GDE social work supervisors and DSD social workers providing support to learners and schools. It is unique in terms of school social work services provided by both departments with practitioners not located in schools but at provincial, regional and district offices.

These departments, as highlighted in some of the participants' narratives, have a collaborative partnership to ensure the effective support of the needs of learners and schools. This collaboration is confirmed by the Gauteng Department of Social Development and the Gauteng Department of Education (2018) in their memorandum of agreement (MOU) and also in the SASA Act. This MOU clarifies that DSD social workers would be responsible for certain schools considered 'high

risk' in the province. This suggests that schools that are not high risks are then attended to by GDE social work supervisors. Therefore, considering the limited number of school social work employment opportunities in the school social work practice and the high number of schools across the province, these particular partnerships are significant for the growth of school social work services (Boboyi, 2024). In the SASA Act, Section 4.7.3, collaboration between different stakeholders and school social workers is encouraged, especially in circumstances where learners are at risk of being excluded or experience learning barriers.

Additionally, the partnerships with other stakeholders serve to ensure adequate service delivery and holistic support for learners. The above narratives are consistent with Pretorius (2020), who stated that through collaboration partnerships, school social workers can better plan and implement interventions tailored to the specific needs of schools. Collaboration, as evidenced in the narratives, facilitates the sharing of information and expertise. These collaborative efforts not only help to prevent duplication of services but also clarify the roles of different providers, ensuring a more coordinated approach to addressing student needs.

As such, it may be argued that through joint planning, school social workers and relevant stakeholders can identify and address the complex needs and challenges, ensuring that the services provided are tailored to the unique requirements of each school and the specific learners. Moreover, the narratives are supported by the SIAS and ISHP policies. Specifically, the SIAS policy notes that collaboration between social services professionals and education districts to ensure that learners experiencing psychosocial learning barriers are supported beyond the school level, while the ISHP document recognises that social services professionals are significant in supporting vulnerable learners such as orphans and providing psychosocial support to school-going children in all compulsory grades.

6.2.3.2 Subtheme 3.2: Collaborative partnerships on cases related to child protection

In responding to cases relating to child protection (i.e., sexual abuse, removal), the participants reported that they partnered with the South African Police Services (SAPS) and Teddy Bear Clinic to ensure successful intervention and protection of the learners, as presented in this subtheme. Specific to collaboration with SAPS, the partnership was for attending to sexual abuse cases, the removal of children and domestic abuse cases:

“We partner and also keep in contact with colleagues from the police department, especially the child protection unit which assists social workers when it comes to these

sexual offence cases... Sometimes when school social workers go do home visits and have to remove the child, they will have to have a police escort to assist them.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“The police have a domestic violence unit. I just phone them about it and refer the parents to their unit. I’m not leaving it there; I will follow up. If the parents don’t attend, I must find out why you’re not attending because you need to attend. If they don’t have money to go there, I would approach the school transport to request they take these parents to the police.” (Koketso, SSW, SGB)

The collaboration with SAPS and Teddy Bear Clinic was also evident in school programmes facilitated by the school social workers as other participants reported that when school programmes were conducted, they would invite organisations to engage learners on how they could protect themselves from being victims of trafficking, talking about sexual abuse and reporting sexual abuse:

“When I do school programs, I invite SAPS to come and help me with the program and they address their role. For example, when it comes to human trafficking, I ask SAPS to explain to learners and present to them what you do, and provide some tips on how the learners can be careful and how the learners can take care of themselves.” (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

“There is a partnership with South African Police Services and the learners are encouraged to report through Form 22 as soon as possible so that evidence can be taken at an important time. They have 72 hours to report rape and do the rape kit. If the 72 hours lapse, it becomes a challenge in terms of having evidence. So when school social workers partner with SAPS, they emphasise that the learners need to report it immediately and they mustn’t wait.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

“We invite the Teddy Bear clinic especially when we do sexual abuse programs and we need to talk to the learners about sexual abuse” (Emelda, SSW)

Linda (Supervisor, DSD) reported that there was a partnership with Teddy Bear Clinic in instances where learners were victims of sexual abuse: *“And we also link with different kinds of organisations like the Teddy bear clinic when we have sexual allegation cases because in some of the cases you might find rape cases, all those kinds of sexual offences against children.”*

On the contrary, Sarah (SSW, DSD) noted that in cases related to child protection, they sometimes involved an internal unit, the Child Protection Unit in the Department of Social Development: *“Sometimes we involve our child protection DSD field and intake unit to take over.”*

These findings illustrate social workers' collaborative roles in school social work services when partnering with the SAPS, Teddy Baer Clinic, and DSD Child Protection Unit to address child protection cases. This partnership with SAPS appears to be crucial for the protection and safety of the learners. This is consistent with the Department of Social Development (2019), which outlines that when there are grounds for believing that the child is in immediate danger and their safety and rights are violated, the school social workers and police officials have a non-negotiable collaborative role.

The partnership with Teddy Bear Clinic is crucial for specialised support in sexual abuse cases, as Oosthuizen (2018) and Rapholo and Zimba (2022) explain that the NGO provides support and mediation to children and their families, and also specialises in forensic abuse identification and court proceedings documentation. The findings regarding collaborative work correspond with the SCT, which underscores that knowledge and reality are socially co-constructed through interaction and influenced by cultural and historical contexts (Sahin, 2013).

In the realm of school social work and collaboration, it can be asserted that through collective meaning and action, various stakeholders co-construct an understanding of justice, protection, and the child's right to a secure home and school environment. According to the principles of SCT, the roles of various stakeholders are not static and, as demonstrated by the study's findings, evolve in response to the protection and safety needs of learners in schools.

6.2.3.3 Subtheme 3.3: Collaborative partnerships on cases related to poverty alleviation

In addressing issues of poverty and material deprivation faced by learners and their families, this theme outlines that school social workers collaborate with other departments, units and organisations. The participants indicated that this collaboration occurred when issues such as lack of school uniforms and lack of food were identified in learners' circumstances, as noted below:

“I attend to the social needs of the children... Many of these children come from dysfunctional families, and sometimes they don't have school uniforms and we don't have uniforms at the school. So I need to know which resources to tap into to assist the learners with a uniform. The uniform boosts the confidence of the learners.” (Koketso, SSW, SGB)

“We collaborate with the Sustainable Livelihoods Unit only if maybe we need a school uniform. Even though most of the time the learners don’t receive a school uniform as the unit will tell us that they don’t have enough uniforms. So children won’t be able to get those uniforms. But they also assist with food parcels. If there is a food parcel at the food bank, we also issue food parcels to those learners who need food parcels.” (Emelda, SSW, DSD)

“In some of the cases that I have, maybe when I do a home visit, I pick it up that the situation at home is not okay. And there’s no food, or food is there, but it’s not enough for everyone. I then write a referral letter to the food parcel unit. There’s a unit for food parcels. Then, I recommend the families and write the total number of families, addresses, and phone numbers. Then, the food parcel unit will deliver the food to the family. I don’t deliver the food by myself.” (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

Martha (SSW, DSD) provided a practical example of a case they were dealing with that required them to refer to the Sustainable Livelihoods programmes as the affected learners and their families faced emergencies or disasters related to a house fire:

“I’ve had a case where the child’s home was burnt down with a shack. Then I referred the case to a sustainable livelihood, and they were going to help by providing things such as blankets and mattresses. And so we have a component here at the Department of Social Development that assists with such... cases such as for poverty alleviation, we also refer.”

Similarly, Naledi shared similar experiences as she elaborated on the range of support that school social workers can access through their collaboration with Sustainable Livelihood programmes:

“Let’s say maybe it’s a case of a learner who is struggling, or who is faced with poverty. So we’ve got Sustainable Livelihood programs whereby we refer the clients or the case to them for the provision of food parcels. Let’s say maybe it’s a house that has been burnt down, and the learners or the family doesn’t have clothing, doesn’t have food, or anything at all. We also assist in terms of that. Let’s say that in terms of school uniforms, it’s the responsibility of sustainable livelihood.” (Naledi, Supervisor, DSD)

The narratives from some of the participants indicate that school social work services play a crucial role in facilitating access to essential resources, such as food parcels and school uniforms,

through partnerships with internal programmes such as the Sustainable Livelihoods programme. Using CST, Leonardo (2004) explains that oppression is not just a notion that the learners suffer from impositions such as not having these essential resources highlighted in the narratives, but rather oppression arguably occurs when one's human essence is subverted.

The oppression factor is seen as something more profound, and based on the narratives, may occur where as a result of lack of these resources, the learner's inherent dignity, identity, autonomy and sense of self is undermined and devalued. This affects their ability to fully express themselves as learners and participate equally in the school and classroom setting.

Nevertheless, the significance of this specific partnership as reported in the findings in this section recognised by the Integrated School Health Policy (Department of Health, & Department of Basic Education, 2012). as different professionals and systems are urged to contribute to ensuring that learners from poor or underprivileged school contexts affected by poverty are supported. Khumalo (2023) found that there was an apparent need for school uniform support in some South African township schools, therefore, necessitating this partnership between school social workers and the Sustainable Livelihood Programme.

Strydom (2014) ascertained the narrative and indicated that social workers usually provide concrete help by delivering food parcels. This collaboration is particularly significant as it enables school social workers to identify and respond to the immediate needs of learners, ensuring that they receive the necessary support in times of hardship (i.e., house fires) from the Sustainable Livelihood programme.

6.2.3.4 Subtheme 3.4: Collaborative partnerships for issues related to behavioural modification

In addressing learners' behavioural issues (e.g., bullying and substance abuse), school social workers collaborate with different specialised units within DSD and community safety organisations, as presented in this subtheme. Specifically, the participants reported that school social workers engage in various collaborative relationships with both internal (i.e., Social Crime and Prevention Unit) and external stakeholders (i.e., SAPS) to address the needs of learners:

“With internal collaboration, that is collaboration in our department, we collaborate with the Social Crime and Prevention unit for when we are doing programs such as the bullying program.” (Enhle, SSW, DSD)

“If there is bullying at the school, we work with the officials from SAPS. We normally do an awareness together in which they explain to the learners their role and that bullying is a criminal offence and a case can be opened against the perpetrator. If there is gangsterism at school, then they are also involved for the protection of learners.” (Sarah, SSW, DSD)

Other participants reported that for cases or issues on substance abuse, they collaborated with the DSD Substance Abuse unit and external NPOs to ensure that the cases were attended to accordingly:

“Another thing that makes this child is not coping well, these issues of substances, that’s where we involve our NPOs who are dealing with substance abuse or we involve social development Substance Abuse unit to be able to assist this child.” (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

“Or maybe there are cases whereby a learner is addicted to drugs and as a result of that there are behavioural problems and so we also refer internally to the Substance Abuse unit for further intervention.” (Naledi, Supervisor, DSD)

Other participants reflected on the collaboration between school social workers and other professionals and organisations for supporting learners struggling with substance abuse use. These partnerships were specifically with the local rehabilitation centre and social workers specifically dealing with substance abuse services and were carried out through referral interventions and school awareness programmes:

“The school social workers also partner up with Westview Clinic, which supports learners who have substance problems. The clinic provides a rehabilitation centre and also outpatient services. So the school social workers would refer the learners there for support.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“For learners who need to go to rehab or who have experimented with drugs, we refer them to social workers who deal directly with substance abuse who would then place them in rehab.” Wendy (Supervisor, DSD)

“The school social worker will come in as a psychosocial support and then the substance abuse social worker will come in and address substance abuse issues. So what happens is with our collaboration, maybe when social workers from the substance abuse program

come into an awareness and some cases arise after that engagement with learners, the school social worker will then be able to take over and provide the one-on-ones or group work after the awareness was provided, which is very difficult if the school social worker does it alone.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

The narratives presented in this subtheme suggest that school social workers in the DSD’s school social work programme engage in both internal and external collaborations to effectively support learners with behavioural issues. These problems were identified as bullying and crime, substance abuse, and rehabilitation of substance users. Specifically, social workers and SAPS established bullying and crime programmes in collaboration with one another.

Substance use and abuse support were through social workers referring learners for intervention as specialized services at local clinics and to substance abuse social workers. This is consistent with Nemes (2009) who explained the significance of collaboration between social workers and other support personnel in education systems. The SCT put forth that our realities are socially constructed and therefore confronting learners' realities and perceptions regarding school violence, such as bullying, and substance abuse is necessary within the outlined partnership. As evidenced in the findings, learners are warned that bullying constitutes a criminal offence with potential legal repercussions, including incarceration.

As such, it may be argued that the partnership stakeholders aim to co-construct learners' understanding of bullying and violence within the school environment to mitigate the prevalence of school violence. This activity demonstrates that the knowledge and understanding of bullying that learners have are not inherent but produced through social interactions and shared meaning. The warning related to acts of bullying as a criminal offence further shows that social workers and other collaborative stakeholders deliberately attempt to construct new meanings of bullying behaviour as a serious transgression with legal consequences. This role, fulfilled in collaboration with other stakeholders, is of significant value considering that literature reports that bullying is a prevalent issue affecting many school-going children, with 48% of children in sub-Saharan Africa having experienced it (UNESCO, 2019)

6.2.3.5 Subtheme 3.5: Collaborative partnerships for the prevention of teenage pregnancy

This subtheme outlines the collaborative relationships between school social workers and various health-related stakeholders, particularly the Department of Health, to address teenage pregnancy affecting schools. This collaboration allowed the social workers to leverage the expertise of health

professionals in addressing the health-related aspects of sexual and reproductive health challenges faced by learners such as teenage pregnancy. The extracts below elaborate on this partnership and the rationale for it:

“We collaborate because we understand that issues such as learner pregnancy speak to us as social workers, as well with the Department of Health and the Department of Social Development.” (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

“Collaboration with the Department of Health includes addressing issues such as teenage pregnancy and the reproductive system because as a social worker, you don’t know the depth in terms of the health part of it. We only provide services related to the effects and social consequences of it and the Department of Health will be addressing such as teenage pregnancy and reproduction.” (Martha, SSW, DSD)

“Then we also collaborate with health promoters such as nurses whereby we invite them especially when we are doing teenage pregnancy programs.” (Emelda, SSW, DSD)

Some participants' responses indicate the collaborative partnership between the school social workers and the Department of Health when it comes to health promotion. As such, they partnered on the programme for health promotions, specifically, raising awareness about teenage pregnancy and reproductive health for learners. In CST, McDade (1992) argues that learners experiencing teenage pregnancy were often noted to experience social oppression in their communities as they were constructed as problematic learners.

It may be argued that this oppression, may affect the social experiences of affected learners and school social workers, through the noted collaboration, and that they need to be careful about how they address this social issue, as it may perpetuate the oppression experienced by the affected learners. Although the content covered in these promotion programmes was not explicitly outlined, some participants noted that the role of school social work services was limited to raising awareness about the social effects and consequences of teenage pregnancy and general reproduction.

This suggests that they recognised the limitations of their knowledge and, therefore, only focused on aspects within their professional parameters. This coordinated effort is supported by Skobi and Makofane (2017, p. 241) who note that teenage pregnancy is complex and as evidenced in the participants' responses, requires collaboration with “various welfare, educational and health organisations to successfully prevent teenage pregnancy.”

6.2.3.6 Subtheme 3.6: Collaborative partnerships for mental health support

In acknowledging that suicide was prevalent in the Gauteng province, this subtheme outlines collaboration partnerships between school social workers, the Department of Health, and other mental health organisations such as SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group) and Lifeline. In these organisations, participants frequently referred to mental health experts as nurses and psychologists:

“We also involved the psychologists as well as health experts, the nurses, because now particularly, in the Gauteng province, we are having learners who attempt to commit suicide and those who commit” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“With the mental health awareness programs, we invite people like psychologists from clinics and the Department of Health because recently we have been having so many challenges on suicide.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“We involve an educational psychologist when dealing with mental health. When we identify that the problem is more related to mental health like the child threatening to kill himself, then that is when we involve our nurses, and clinical psychologist from the clinics.” (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

“We also have just right now established a partnership with one of the organisations that helps with mental issues for suicide cases. So whenever we want to do programs in terms of suicide awareness, we contact SADAG.” Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“We also invite Lifeline, because this year they say to us their focus is more on suicide because we are receiving a lot of cases of suicide. So they requested to collaborate with us as school social workers so that they can spread this information to learners about suicide.” (Emelda, SSW, DSD)

Some participants clarified that while they have a role to play in the mental health support of learners, they were not experts in mental health (i.e., diagnosing, assessments, and psychotherapy) and in dealing with suicide cases. Specifically, they explained that school social workers were secondary respondents as indicated by the Mental Health Act and mental health specialists had a primary role of supporting learners' mental health needs:

“We are quite clear in our handling of suicide cases and we understand that we are secondary service providers. We understand the Mental Health Act clearly when it says

that when a person is threatening to commit harm to themselves, they're supposed to be taken to a health institution or health practitioner where they're assisted. The act gives a directive really to say they're supposed to be admitted for something like a period of three days and be under observation and assessment." (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

"Psychologists are trained in depth in terms of counselling, unlike social workers, especially about cases such as suicide. There in the partnership, we are secondary respondents." (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

"We are not well trained about dealing with methods of suicide. So we involve the nurses as well as the psychologists to assist us with that... addressing mental health, it is a Department of Health issue because I believe they go thoroughly about assisting the learners and then they are well trained about that." (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

"With mental health awareness programs, because you find that social workers have little knowledge on those issues, so we invite other experts and specialities on fields related to mental health." (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

Considering the above responses, some participants clarified that their role was to also link learners who have mental health challenges with mental health experts through referral interventions. This was often the situation once a need for mental health services was identified by the school social workers:

"With the current ways in which school social workers are hired and deployed in schools, mental health issues need to be referred to psychologists... The social worker cannot do mental health interventions, but she needs to know where to direct those cases. She can't just say, no, I cannot do this. The social worker must link the learner to the appropriate services." (Khethani, SSW, DSD).

"We have referrals, like in case of mental health, where we refer the kids to the clinics so that the child can receive mental health intervention." (Linda, SSW, DSD).

"Our role is to support and link the child or the learner with professionals. We don't have the power to diagnose, but if you can see those symptoms, you have the right to refer the learner for psychological assessment." (Emelda, SSW, DSD).

“For example, with self-harming, in most cases, you’d find that the nature of the problem is psychological. I have to ensure that I contact the clinical psychologists so that they can attend psychotherapy sessions” (Enhle, SSW, DSD).

The above narrative provides a snippet of the experiences of some of the participants with mental health issues in the school setting. They further highlight the significant issues of suicide in Gauteng schools. This is consistent with Shilubane et al. (2013) and Mahlangu et al. (2021) who found that a plethora of suicide cases reported amongst school-going children, which they linked to complex circumstances such as household socioeconomic standing, family crises, loss of loved ones, bullying and humiliation, child abuse, and so on.

Therefore, in supporting learners faced with these issues or responding to such cases, the school social workers relied on their partnership with mental health support services and expertise offered by psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health-related organisations such as SADAG and Lifeline. These mental health services and experts took the primary role, while school social workers became the secondary respondents, whose role was to refer learners to the services and experts when mental health challenges were identified.

The narratives are consistent with Ruth and O’Connor (2020) who indicated that ideally, school social workers are more suitable for strengthening the linkage between formal and informal mental health care within the school context and the local community context. Practically, Kjellgren et al. (2022) further support the referral role as they note that in situations such as suicidal thoughts, the learners should be referred to professional mental health services.

Within the documents that were reviewed in this study, only the SIAS policy and the MOU reflect mental health services. Vaguely, the SIAS policy notes that social workers are part of support services for children diagnosed with mental health disorders, while the MOU reflects social work support for learners who practice harmful acts such as self-harm and suicide.

6.2.3.7 Subtheme 3.7: Collaborative partnerships to support families

In providing comprehensive support and services to learners and their families, the participants reported that they frequently collaborate with various community-based organisations, as apparent in this subtheme. Collaboration was with close family support networks such as Families South Africa (FAMSA), a non-profit organisation specialising in relationship counselling and helping with family functioning and parental skills, as evidenced in the below extract:

"I support the children and then I refer the mother or the father or the family to a close network that I have. Or when I see the emotional support that school is not enough because we don't have a lot of time on our hands, I refer the children to outside therapists that work with the school." (Natasha, SSW, SGB)

"Most of our children come from dysfunctional families with domestic issues and families that are unable to properly communicate and discipline kids in inappropriate measures. FAMSA is one of those organisations that we partner up with that have good programs that provide parenting and mediation services, such as skills for parents to be better and improve the family function." (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

"I refer the learners for long-term counselling to one of the NGOs that I'm working with called FAMSA. So I would refer to either the learner or the whole family. FAMSA has its own structure; they will see the learner privately, see the family members privately, and sometimes combine the whole family and do family counselling." (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

"If there is a need to link the child or the family with other relevant stakeholders like FAMSA, they will have to do that, liaise, and then send a request for that particular family or learner to be seen while continuing to provide support when necessary... I would say to mom, would go to FAMSA to get information regarding the parenting skills they provide." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

The above narratives from the DSD and GDE social workers recognised that some learners came from challenging family backgrounds, which include domestic violence and dysfunctional family dynamics. These family issues are noted by Kelly et al. (2015), who highlight that learners who experience them in the home environment need holistic intervention from social workers and other service providers within their community.

Moreover, Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017) explain that parents' ability to create safe and nurturing environments will likely increase learners' well-being and positively impact their perception of school. As such, the referrals were made to FAMSA or close support networks as part of a partnership to provide holistic intervention services to learners and their families. FAMSA focuses on relationship counselling and assisting families to better their family functioning and parenting skills through long-term counselling, individually or as a family. If necessary, FAMSA will coordinate with other relevant parties to ensure that the learners or families receive the appropriate assistance. In some instances, it was also recommended that parents utilise FAMSA services.

In CST, theorists argue that family issues such as domestic violence should be seen beyond their mere surface appearances as a set of aggressive behaviours but rather described as an outcome of patriarchal control and household power struggles (Hamiduzzaman et al., 2021; Harvey, 2022). Therefore, arguments may be made in the context of the findings of this study that collaborative support towards learners in households experiencing domestic violence needs to span beyond identifying the violence and supporting those affected to an in-depth examination of domestic violence to provide successful intervention, which may reduce future occurrences of such violence.

6.3 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented an overview of the findings from the participants related to the roles of social workers in Gauteng public schools. The participants offered a wide range of responses on role and function descriptions, which resonated with the function of school social work from a global viewpoint, and reviewed the literature. The roles presented in this chapter include functions at the micro and mezzo levels and within collaborative partnerships in the education setting.

At the micro level, their roles include advocating for children's rights, creating conducive school environments, conducting interviews and assessments with learners, providing individual counselling and trauma debriefing, and conducting home visits for cases needing home and family support services. At the mezzo level, they conduct needs assessments for group work and school campaigns, implement and facilitate these groups and campaigns, and train teachers to identify learners' psychosocial issues. Social workers also collaborate with different government departments, police services, NGOs, and community organisations to ensure that holistic support is provided to schools and learners.

The findings, therefore, suggest that social workers have an undeniable role in school settings. In the next chapter, the researcher presents findings and discussions for data on contextual factors that influence school social work practice in the Gauteng Province's public schools and findings on the current and perceived education and training requirements of school social workers.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONTEXTUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE PRACTICE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN THE GAUTENG PROVINCE.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I explore the contextual factors that affect school social work practice in the Gauteng Province. Specifically, I present findings addressing the second and third objectives of the overall research study, i.e., objective two is to explore the contextual factors that act as facilitators and barriers to the practice of school social work, and objective three is to understand the current and perceived education and training requirements of school social workers. Similar to the previous chapter, the data presented is drawn from the interviews conducted with all participant groups and is analysed using the deductive thematic approach.

7.2 FINDINGS ON FACTORS THAT ACT AS FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO THE PRACTICE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

The findings are organised according to seven themes, as outlined in Table 5: i) support and resources received for school social work services, ii) schools and learners' willingness to receive school social work services, iii) supervision support for DSD social workers iv) administration and staffing challenges at the department of social development v) administration, structural and logistic constraints at the schools vi) role confusion and perception issues vii) coordination and collaboration difficulties. Each theme has sub-themes. Themes 1-3 are categorised under factors that act as facilitators, while Themes 4-7 are categorised under factors that act as barriers to school social work practice.

Table 5: Themes and subthemes on factors that act as facilitators and barriers to the practice of school social work

Factors that act as facilitators	
Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Support and resources received for school social work services	Subtheme 1.1: Support from the DSD provisional coordinator
	Subtheme 1.2: Being placed in GDE districts makes practitioners accessible and facilitates collaboration

	Subtheme 1.3: Receiving collegial support from supervisors and colleagues Subtheme 1.4: Access to technological communication resources
Theme 2: Schools and learners' willingness to receive school social work services	Subtheme 2.1: The recognition, appreciation and support for school social work services Subtheme 2.2: Schools requesting support intervention for learners Subtheme 2.3: Learners interacting with the school social work services
Theme 3: Supervision support for DSD school social work program	Subtheme 3.1: Allocation, guiding and monitoring of the referred cases to school social workers Subtheme 3.2: Facilitating supervision sessions and case discussion Subtheme 3.3: Offering personal and emotional support to the school social workers Subtheme 3.4: Supervisors advocate for school social work services at schools Subtheme 3.5: Empowering school social workers through mentoring and capacity building Subtheme 3.6: Enhance school partnerships through engagements with schools
Factors that act as barriers	
Theme 4: Administration and staffing challenges at the department of social development	Subtheme 4.1: Inadequate staffing levelling, high school allocations, and high intervention targets Subtheme 4.2: The impact of large caseloads and low staff on school social workers' responsibilities Subtheme 4.3: Lack of funding for materials to use with the learners

	Subtheme 4.4: Lack of transportation to schools affects the practice of school social work
Theme 5: Administration, structural and logistic constraints at the schools	Subtheme 5.1: School staff's reluctance to complete Form 22 Subtheme 5.2: Challenges Posed by Non-Functional School Management Structures Subtheme 5.3: Challenges with Coordinating Access to Schools for Preventative Programmes Subtheme 5.4: Lack of space for supporting one-on-one intervention for learners
Theme 6: Role Confusion and Perception Issues	Subtheme 6.1: Lack of understanding and confusion about the role of school social work services by teachers Subtheme 6.2: School social workers are perceived as outsiders, undermined, and intimidated in the school setting Subtheme 6.3: Lack of practice demarcation at DSD
Theme 7: Coordination and Collaboration Difficulties	Subtheme 7.1: Different understandings of high-risk schools between DSD and GDE Subtheme 7.2: Lack of support from the Gauteng Department of Education for the practice of school social work Subtheme 7.3: Collaboration with other stakeholders as a challenge Subtheme 7.4: Lack of parental support and involvement as a challenge

7.2.1 Theme 1: Support and resources received for school social work services

Various support and resource structures were highlighted as factors that act as facilitators of the practice of school social work and the services offered by practitioners. As such, the subthemes in this theme include provisional coordination of the school social work programme by DSD, access to collaboration resources and support when placed in GDE districts, collegial support from supervisors and colleagues, and access to technological communication resources.

7.2.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Support from the DSD provincial coordinator

The subtheme outlines the significant role of provincial coordination support provided to the practice of school social work. A few of the participants, specifically DSD school social work supervisors emphasised the significant support provided by the provincial school social work coordinator (also referred to as the manager), who is seen as the driving force behind the success and recognition of the school social work programme. This persistence, dedication, and advocacy from the provincial coordinator are seen as crucial in supporting the school social workers and advocating for the programme:

“Here at DSD, our manager has been the pillar through this school social work program. Even before we came, from what we hear, she fought for the program to be recognised and to be where it is today. So, she goes beyond and ensures we are supported through and through.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

“I give it to her; the manager is doing her level best regarding exposing school social workers to training.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD).

Emelda shared similar sentiments about the provincial coordinator’s role, expressing that they faced significant challenges while acknowledging their on-going efforts to advocate for and assist the school social workers:

“You know what, our coordinator at the province. She’s trying her best, but it’s not easy. It’s not easy. She’s trying her best, you know, to make noise about this program of school social workers, but she’s not winning. But we are not giving up; we are trying whatever we have in the region. The coordinator is trying her best to assist.... Remember, before, we didn’t have any coordinators because, in Johannesburg, School Social Workers started in 2015. We didn’t have any coordinator. Then we’re doing our things the way we do it, like we were doing social work. But now, at least, we have a coordinator in the province. If we have issues, we take them to her, and she will see what to do with them.” (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

The above narratives from some participants suggest that the coordination role was essential in ensuring that school social work services are realised within the province by advocating and supporting the programme and addressing issues that impact the services. Weinbach and Taylor (2015, p. 6) support these narratives, and they note that social workers in such a managerial role should contribute to the "efficient delivery of services to clients" and that their role is crucial for

laying the foundation for organisational success. These roles occupied by the provincial coordinator are echoed by Vergottini (2019), who suggests that they should provide comprehensive support to the practice of school social work in terms of ensuring that these services are provided across all schools in the province, as well as in-service training and professional development opportunities while monitoring the service delivery.

The findings, such as the remarks towards the coordinator's role, '*She's trying her best, but it's not easy*' and '*She fought for the programme,*' expose the oppressive context of the school social work programme within the DSD. The absence of supportive policies at both national and provincial levels imposes limitations on school social work services, compelling coordinators to continually advocate for their role, which has normalised their necessity for the success and efficacy of the school social work programme.

7.2.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Being placed in GDE districts makes practitioners accessible and facilitates collaboration

Emphasis was placed on practitioners being accessible when placed in GDE district offices, as outlined in this subtheme. Some of the participants particularly emphasised that being based in the district office allowed them to be accessible and easily identifiable as social services professionals, and allowed them to directly interact with various officials and support professionals at district offices, facilitating more efficient case discussions and referrals:

"So that we can be accessible for accessibility.... Being placed in the district, it's very helpful because if you come back from school, we already know who to approach in case you need to refer as you already know the person and the face and the office. For instance, if there's a need for psychologists, circuit managers, cluster leaders, nutrition officials, or chief educational specialists, we already know them, and you can discuss the case with those particular people. The case discussions become very easy. Unlike if we were at DSD, then you'll have to refer via email. And the reports to those challenges become very easy and quick." (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

"I am based in the district, in the Department of Education. We work together with educational psychologists, and inclusion specialists to ensure that we look at the holistic well-being of the child. For example, a case related to the social ill or its behavioural problems would need my intervention. I will then check with the child to see what contributes to their behavioural problems. So if I find that probably that the learner has learning barriers that is where the inclusion specialist can advocate for the learner and

they can see the child and ensure that the learner fills in the necessary documents for the education psychologists to come and assess the learner.... I think that being in the district like it's an advantage.” (Enhle, SSW, DSD)

The above extracts indicate that the placement of school social workers at GDE district offices is a significant advantage that promotes better collaboration, accessibility, efficiency and, therefore, being a facilitator of school social work practice. It must be highlighted that the narratives in this subtheme specifically refer to DSD school social workers and the services they provide. At the same time, they are placed within the GDE at the district office within the Tshwane municipality.

The extracts are consistent with findings from Van Sittert and Wilson (2016) and Vergottini and Weyers (2020), which highlight that the strategic positioning of school social workers in education departments enables them to work more effectively with various stakeholders (e.g., psychologists, inclusion specialists, and nutrition officials) to address learners' holistic needs and provide responsive support to those in need. Makhalemele et al. (2021) support the collaboration as they noted at District-Based Support Team level, the professionals mentioned in the participants' extract should be there to ensure holistic support is provided to learners.

This proximity and familiarity with district personnel, reflected by Grace and Enhle above, make it easier for school social workers to advocate for learners' needs and access the necessary resources and services. Apart from school social workers placed in specific schools, it may be argued that the placement of school social workers at DGE districts is ideal as research from other South African provinces has shown it to be effective (Van Sittert & Wilson 2016; Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). Such placement allows for a more holistic approach to supporting learners' well-being, as school social workers can address social, emotional, and educational needs in coordination with various stakeholders already working with support units in the district offices.

7.2.1.3 Subtheme 1.3: Receiving collegial support from supervisors and colleagues

The crucial role that supervisors and colleagues play in supporting school social workers in their school social work practice is apparent in this subtheme. Specifically, support from the supervisors helped to ensure that the school social workers felt supported to carry out their responsibilities effectively:

“So also sometimes I normally involve my supervisors, maybe when a case of challenge, I seek guidance from her as well” (Eleanor,

"I would say I have a very supportive supervisor who can assist me when I'm experiencing challenges or barriers that limit me from doing my job" (Martha, SSW, DSD).

"I normally share them with my supervisor because at first, my supervisor wasn't away. And at first, I also thought I had this under control. I cannot just run to my supervisor for everything that happens at school, so I reached a point where I didn't just let her know. So I chatted with her and there was a school with expectations I could not fulfil." (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

Some supervisor participants shared similar sentiments as they reflected that they supported social workers:

"Sometimes we also do go to the school and also assist when there's a need. As I've indicated we are a small team and then sometimes we also do go out and assist if there's a need." (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

"That's because there are a lot of cases, and sometimes you'll find that the social worker is very busy at that point when they are trying to get hold of the social worker, then I'll be able to assist." (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

In addition to the support that supervisors provided to school social workers and schools, some participants emphasised the importance of the support they received from their colleagues, which aided in their practice knowledge, skills, and expertise. The following extracts reflect this:

"Yes, our school prioritises the children's emotional well-being. So all the personnel and the principal, literally everyone is supporting me because they know if a child is not emotionally well, he or she won't do good on all the other levels." (Natasha, SSW, SGB)

"I think it will be my colleagues who are supportive as well as my supervisor when it comes to my work because like with regards to social work, you learn every day and we deal with different cases and sometimes you may find like you don't know how to go about a certain case so you get advice from a colleague or even a supervisor depending on the challenges of those cases...." (Participant D, SSW)

"But I'm also open to help. With my colleagues, I always tell them, I have a program on this day. So if you are available, please come and join me. So when they are available, they do join me. Others also help me to present." (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

The extracts from some participants suggest that school social workers received support from their supervisors and other school colleagues and supported one another through the awareness programmes and in terms of sharing practice knowledge. This collegial support was a facilitator to the school social work practice. Specifically, the supervisors guided school social workers on challenging cases and collaborative partnerships.

The DSD social workers suggested supervision support as they were the only participant group that received direct supervision in their school social work practice roles. Regarding school social workers employed by the SGB, the participants did not reflect any supervision support that they received, which Boboyi confirms to be the case in employment by SGB and that school social workers often report directly to the school principal. Therefore, this suggests that SGB-employed school social workers did not have adequate professional practitioner support, except from their immediate colleagues, such as other teachers, as evidenced in this study.

Nevertheless, DSD supervision support was significant in DSD practitioners' school social work practice. This is consistent with Gumbi et al. (2024), who note that supervision support was instrumental in supporting social workers as they navigate complex and demanding cases that may stem from their contextual situations. The supervisors additionally extended their support to the school social work programme by providing direct services and intervention when school social workers were inundated with cases and could not respond promptly to pressing situations at the school.

While this is commendable to ensure that schools are supported, it shifts role parameters. Weinbach and Taylor (2015) contend that supervisors do everything except render direct services to clients. The participants also indicated that they relied on each other for support. This practice is consistent with Zamiri and Esmaili's (2024) ideas of knowledge sharing in which practitioners interact to share their expertise, perspectives, and ideas, therefore learning from each other. This is also consistent with the social constructionist theory, which, in this case, affirms how social workers, through social interactions and practice experiences, adapt existing knowledge to new practice situations (Burr, 2024).

7.2.1.4 Subtheme 1.4: Access to technological communication resources

As outlined in this subtheme, access to technological resources such as laptops and data was another contextual factor that helped facilitate social workers' efforts in Gauteng public schools. In their responses, most of the participants indicated that school social workers had access to

laptops and cell phones that they use to complete their administration, communicate with clients, and schedule appointments:

“I want to praise DSD as school social workers were given cell phones way back before all the social workers in Gauteng could receive cell phones. They were even given laptops so that when they are at school attending cases, they can type their process notes if they wanted.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

“The school social workers are mostly prioritised. When it comes to providing cell phones to the working, staff, school social workers were the first people to be given the phones because they are working outside...They were the first people to receive laptops because they needed to function even when they were at school.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“We do have laptops and cell phones... When the schools call, we call the clients and communicate with the clients. We set up scheduling appointments.” (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

“Our school social workers, they have laptops, they have cell phones, they have 3G’s, you know, the province has tried to make sure that they have all that.” (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

“My colleagues have tools of the trade, phones, laptops, you know, 3G's and things like that.” (Faith, Key Informant, GDE)

The provision of technological resources such as laptops and cell phones was crucial in facilitating the work of school social workers in Gauteng public schools. These resources enabled efficient administration, communication with clients, and scheduling of appointments, enhancing their overall productivity and effectiveness in addressing the needs of learners. The findings are supported by previous research that argues that access to sufficient resources, such as the Internet and technology, facilitates the practice of school social work (Capp et al., 2021; Daftary, 2021; Johnson & Barsky, 2020).

Moreover, access to cell phones may facilitate seamless communication between school social workers, parents, teachers, and external support networks and enable faster information sharing and coordinated interventions. School social workers may also use these resources to access a wealth of information and other resources, such as evidence-based practices, relevant research and searching for support networks in instances where other forms of support are required for the

learners. This, therefore, would contribute to making informed decisions about practice approaches.

7.2.2 Theme 2: Schools and learners' willingness to receive school social work services

Schools and learners face multiple challenges that impact teaching and learning; therefore, they are often open to school social work services. This openness and willingness to receive support services are reported in this theme under the following subthemes: recognition, appreciation, and support for the services, schools requesting support intervention for the learners, and learners interacting with the school social work services.

7.2.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: The recognition, appreciation, and support for school social work services

This subtheme outlines the experienced recognition, appreciation, and support for the practice of school social work services in the Gauteng province. In their responses, the majority of the participants from DSD reported that some school staff members were supportive and welcoming of the school social workers. In some instances, the school principals accommodated the school social workers in their offices so that they could provide their services to learners and also actively assisted the school social workers in engaging with uncooperative parents:

"Some schools, they are good, I don't want to lie. I have one school that respects me so much that when I come either announced or unannounced, the deputy principal will move to either join the principal and give you their office to use with learners." (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

"There are those principals that are very supportive of our school social work services. They will even assist in issues such as parents who do not want to come and who are not cooperative. Sometimes they would ensure to keep the children at the school until the social worker arrives on that particular day or they would make sure that those parents come to the school." (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

Martha, (SSW, DSD), a school social worker recognised that some schools were receptive to school social work services and, therefore, noted that they were appreciative of the services:

"I would say there are schools that appreciate and acknowledge school social work as a profession, and they're welcoming and adhering to how we work as the Department of

Social Development, and they're always eager to receive our intervention on assisting the learners."

Emelda (Supervisor, DSD) noted that the recognition was from other social workers outside the field of school social work:

"When I was attending another programme, there was a social worker, an intake social worker from Region E, who said they were happy about this school social work programme as it has lessened our burden because now they were receiving a lot of cases from schools..."

The above responses illustrate that some school principals are supportive and welcoming of outside school social workers and that there is a growing recognition and appreciation of the need for school social workers. This recognition was reported from the school setting alone and social workers in other specialisations or units. As evidenced in some of the responses, the principals accommodate the social workers in their offices and, when necessary, assist them in engaging with uncooperative parents.

Bulanda and Jalloh (2019) came to similar conclusions as teachers and school administrators recognised that school social workers were significant to have in the school setting to provide individual support to learners, help manage difficult school situations, and improve academic performance. Boboyi (2024) found that school staff members were appreciative of such services as they acknowledged learning barriers experienced by learners, such as depression, sexual abuse and the lack of a nutrition programme in school, which needed specialised intervention. As such, the responses in this subtheme suggest that the participants believe that school social workers are providing valuable services. In some instances, they have been recognised and appreciated for their work, even by social work colleagues outside the school context.

7.2.2.2 Subtheme 2.2: Schools requesting support interventions for the learners

Schools and teachers often reach out to school social workers when they encounter learners with psychosocial issues that they are unable to address on their own, as is apparent in this subtheme. The participants from DSD emphasised the importance of school social workers working closely with the SBSTs, which are responsible for identifying learners with various issues and referring them to the school social workers:

“We work hand in hand with the school-based support team SBSTs. They are the ones who refer cases whenever they see a child who has some issues and then they refer it to us... So, whenever the schools have challenges, they normally write to us, informing us that they have a certain challenge with the learners” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“[SBSTs] will only allow us into the school if maybe the school has referred a matter to us, they need us to investigate, then they will allow you to come at any time... They are flexible on time.” (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

“We work hand in hand with the SBST coordinators. So, every school has the SBSTs responsible for identifying each learner with challenges. It may be social problems emanating from school or home. So that’s when they identify different support from the outside. So school social work happens to be one of those resources that will assist in this way.” (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

Tamia (SSW, SGB) who is placed in the school shared similar sentiments, noting that the teachers would request her support for learners with problems: *“Sometimes the learners frustrate the teachers, then they have to revert to me. So the learners might have personal problems and therefore need support and the teachers wouldn't really know what is going on, so they refer to me”*

Linda (Supervisor, DSD) provided a practical case of some issues that the school requested school social work support on which were linked to truancy or learner absenteeism in which schools identified the need for social workers’ intervention:

“Schools mostly identify those cases, such as the child not coming to school or truancy issues, because those kids are affected one way or the other in their academic work. That’s how the schools mostly identify these kids, and that’s why they refer to us... They already have the names of the social workers who are servicing the schools, but we encourage them to email us and the social worker, so as a supervisor” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD).

Expanding on schools requesting support from school social workers, another participant highlighted that the teachers’ primary mandate was to focus on the curriculum and may lack the expertise to address complex psychosocial issues faced by learners: *“Teachers have got their primary focus is to focus on the curriculum, but the problem is that when they encounter a learner that has psychosocial issues, so they don’t know what to do. So that’s why they invite us.”* (Participant J, SSW, DSD).

Other participants acknowledged that schools request support; however, they were often more reactive in their approach, only requesting the school social workers' intervention when a problem has already arisen, rather than proactively seeking their support for prevention:

"They only want us to come there only if there is a problem. But for us to go there and prevent the problem from happening, it becomes a challenge. They will only need you when they see now that, okay, here is the child, what are we going to do now? This problem needs a social worker. That's the only time you are given time. So it means like, I'll forever be a social worker that solves, not prevent." (Sarah, SSW, DSD)

"What social workers are doing is just firefighting. Everything that is done is more on a crisis intervention level, not prevention and early intervention work, which they should be doing." (Nandi, Key Informant, DSD)

In some instances, school social work services were also provided to private schools based on referrals received from those specific schools, which often lack in-house social work services:

"Even other private schools don't have social workers. When I say private school, I am referring to Sparks private schools. We are receiving a lot of cases from those private schools.... They refer to our canalisation using Form 22. When canalisation sees that the matter was referred from the school, they bring it to school social workers." (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

On the contrary, Sarah (SSW, DSD), a school social worker reflected that the private schools' engagement with the school social workers is often limited to statutory services, as they have their private social workers to address psychosocial issues:

"Cases from private schools only come if they need statutory services. However, for psychosocial support, they do have their private social workers. But they don't have the power to do statutory work. Because statutory work now needs a court removal. Then that's when They get stuck; they refer cases to us now."

The narratives mentioned above indicate that the importance of school social work services in tackling the psychological challenges experienced by learners is becoming increasingly acknowledged. Therefore, schools frequently enlist the assistance of these practitioners when they come across problems outside their area of expertise, especially in situations involving truancy

and absenteeism, misuse of social grants, maltreatment of children by parents, and statutory intervention.

The responsibility of addressing these concerns falls within the purview of school social workers and is supported by Kelly et al. (2015) and Thompson et al. (2018). The narratives further indicate that schools clearly understand their professional limitations when it comes to addressing psychosocial issues faced by learners and the specific duties of school social workers. Moreover, the narratives emphasise that effective collaboration between school social workers and school-based support teams (SBSTs) is crucial for identifying and addressing learners' psychosocial issues.

SBSTs play a pivotal role in referring cases to social workers, which indicates a structured support system within schools. Makoelle (2014) supports this collaboration with SBSTs and educators and suggests that it can enhance the support provided to vulnerable learners. However, as evidenced in some of the participant's responses and supported by Sibise and Mathebula (2023), there needs to be a shift from reactive to proactive strategies to ensure that school social work services are more preventative instead of servicing school and learners when the problems have already been identified.

7.2.2.3 Subtheme 2.3: Learners interacting with the school social work services

The responses from a few participants highlight the positive and growing engagement of learners with the school social workers and their ability to provide tailored support to address the diverse needs of the learners. Specifically, they explained that learners stress the need for social workers to their schools, they self-refer and there seems to be no stigma attached to requesting social work services:

“In terms of our clientele to also trust in us as social workers and seeing that they need social work. Sometimes, when the learners see a social worker at the school, they think that it means the learner is being supported and has a lot of problems. But now the learners themselves are stressed to the school because we need a social worker. There's no stigma to the services. (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

“Sometimes learners are emotional, they've got a lot that's going on in their lives and they have no one to talk to. When I'm here, they can always ask their teachers to see or sometimes they directly come to me and ask if they can maybe talk to me.” (Tamia, SSW, SGB)

"We have built relationships with the children. Now they know we are here. They call us the caring aunties. So they know we are always here if they struggle with issues affecting their academic or with family." (Natasha, SSW, SGB)

"Sometimes some other learners, don't talk. When we have the awareness program, learners get the opportunity to meet with social workers, and they refer themselves. Like a self-referral to social workers and the social worker will assist. Sometimes they don't want teachers to know that they are seeing a social worker. (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

"We have self-referrals where the learner is allowed to come to a social worker and say, I need support... And I've noticed that some kids are scared to go and talk to their teachers when there's a problem." (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

The above responses regarding learners approaching school social workers after being exposed to their awareness programme suggest that school social work services play a crucial role in creating a safe and supportive environment for learners to access the necessary services and interventions. As evidenced in the responses, the learners have come to recognise the importance of having social work support services and overcoming the initial stigma associated with seeking support. These responses contradict the reports by Bantje et al. (2020) that learners are not keen to utilise psychosocial and well-being services and were uncomfortable with sharing their challenges with the teachers. This discomfort may be due to poor teacher-learner relationships.

Khumalo (2023) found that teachers sometimes mistreated learners through bad-mouthing and name-shaming them, making them not want to seek support. This notion is also consistent with Gusfre et al.. (2022), who suggest that some teachers were capable of bullying learners and that this negative treatment was evident through verbal humiliation and emotional ill-treatment. Given these issues related to teacher-learner relationships, it may be argued that teachers must be more approachable in their engagements with learners needing support.

Additionally, teachers must be trained to identify early signs of learners needing social work interventions, which is essential. By equipping teachers with the skills to recognise behavioural and emotional indicators of distress, they can act as proactive facilitators in connecting learners to appropriate resources. This, therefore, cements the need for school social work services as they would provide confidential services, advocate for the learners, and provide them with necessary support.

7.2.3 Theme 3: Supervision support for the DSD school social work programme

The responses from the participants suggest that DSD has emphasised supervision support for social workers compared to their counterparts. This supervision support for the school social work programme was through diverse responsibilities necessary for effectively running the school social work services provided by DSD within the province.

As such, this theme reflects these responsibilities from the experiences and perspectives of the DSD supervisors. The subthemes included administering referred cases, equally providing direct services when necessary, facilitating supervision and case discussion sessions, training teachers, advocating for school social work services, mentoring school social workers, and evaluating school social workers' performance.

7.2.3.1 Subtheme 3.1: Administering the referred cases to school social work services

Some DSD supervisor participants reported that they were responsible for the administration of cases referred to by the schools and district for social work intervention, as apparent in this subtheme. In their responses, they also highlighted that they were responsible for allocating, guiding, and monitoring the referred cases that came from the schools and the district:

"Sometimes the cases are referred directly to me from the district. My responsibility is to then allocate these cases and also monitor the return dates as each case has a turnaround time, like a three-month to six-month period. So I monitor those cases to make sure that she's keeping with the timeframe." (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

"Whenever I get a case, I allocate it to them. With guidance, in this case, do 1234. And after they do 1234, they bring the file back. Then I will say do 1234, and check 12 until I'm satisfied that they have provided a current quality service to this client." (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

"The SBST completes the referral form and emails it to me. I screen the referral and thereafter allocate it to the social worker with instructions. And also the schools have my cell phone number, so all the schools have my number" (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

"When I receive those referrals from the school, I have to guide the social workers about the intervention. However, my guidance is sometimes tentative because I'm guiding according to the referral. Maybe they say the referral will say OK, the child is being

abused at home, then I will guide the social worker on what she must do. Then, there is something different when she arrives at the venue, school, or home. That's why I'm telling you that my guidance to the social workers is tentative because it may come the other way around." (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

Considering that schools are mostly in contact with social workers, Ayanda (Supervisor, DSD) reported that sometimes schools would refer the case directly to the social worker who would then pass it to the supervisor:

"Every case reported at the school should be allocated to the supervisor. Unfortunately, that does not always happen. This is because social workers have formed meaningful relationships with their schools, principals, and SBST coordinators. Hence, they receive our cases within their schools through our intake or reporter forms. So after they have received it, it is only when it comes to us as supervisors that we provide the supervision note in terms of what needs to be done in terms of support to the particular learner or family. Then we send it back to the allocated social worker."

Equal distribution of the case workload was further echoed by some of the participants as essential in the DSD school social work programme. In their responses, they gave examples of how cases were shared based on the number of school social workers they had, the targets set by the districts for the different school programmes, and the number of schools they have in their respective districts:

"I have about 187 schools in my district and I'm working with eight social workers who are receiving the ninth social worker next week. So they each have a ratio of plus-minus 20 schools." (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

"From our department, we do get the target for our programme. So like for instance now our target for Ke Moja is 6000 learners for four districts. I've got 9 social workers. When we get our district numbers, I'll have to make sure that I divide that number by the number of social workers that I have. Then I'll be able to calculate for them. If this is our target or the financial year, it means per quarter, per month, per week, this is the number that we have to reach from your school." (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

Once the caseload was allocated to the school social workers, the participants indicated that they would then monitor the administration involved and the relationships that school social workers have with the service users. This is noted in the following extracts:

"Yeah, then after they have to write their reports, I can analyse their report as part of the administration. And sometimes you find that the report has to go to our provincial office. I have to make sure that, okay, the report is up to standard when we submit it to our provincial office... In supervising their work, I'm not policing them, but I'm supervising their work." (Emelda, SSW, DSD)

"So basically, I oversee the office and also I quality assure their work to ensure that it is properly done." (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

"My role is to also monitor their work and cases, monitor their relationships with the schools, and also to ensure that their work is done in line with our generic intervention processes." (Khethani, Supervisor, DSD)

"It's overseeing that whatever programs or interventions they're doing, it's relevant and beneficial to our beneficiaries. So my role is to oversee, support, and guide wherever there's a need." (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

The above narratives outline the critical roles that the supervisor within DSD plays in the administration of referred cases needing social work support. Specifically, the narratives suggest that the supervisors are pivotal in managing and guiding case administration for school social work interventions, ultimately supporting school social work practice. The supervisors would receive the case referrals from the schools, then allocate them to the specific social workers with input and instructions on the type of intervention needed to be provided, monitor the progress of the cases, and assess the quality of intervention provided to the clients.

Considering the high number of schools that DSD school social workers had to support, the participants reflected on the need to distribute the schools to practitioners to ensure that all schools were supported. These responsibilities align with Christian and Hannah's (1983) key characteristics of effective supervision. These include productivity, which entails monitoring and directing activities to staff to ensure that intervention is consistent with the performance standards and objectives of the school social work programme, and quality control, as the supervisor would ensure that attendance and performance to the assigned cases result in a quality of service consistent with the needs of the learners or affected service users, legal policy, social work guidelines and organisations procedures.

7.2.3.2 Subtheme 3.2: Facilitating supervision sessions and case discussions

This subtheme outlines the important role of facilitating one-on-one and group supervision for school social workers in the DSD school social work programme. Some participants confirmed that they provide individual supervision and that it was to address any challenges school social workers faced and also the progress of the cases assigned to them. Respectively, Grace and Wendy reported that to expand on this facilitation and support role, Thobile emphasised the importance of individual supervision sessions between supervisors and school social workers. This is noted in the following explanation:

"I also do supervision sessions" (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

"I do supervision sessions with the social workers." (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

"I do individual supervision whereby I check the successes, whereby I check the challenges whereby at some stage when I identify challenges... Because one of the things for school social work services to work effectively, we need to give support to school social workers. They are working with intense cases. As I mentioned, part of their duty is crisis intervention, which mostly is intensive cases of abuse, and I give them support through individual supervision." (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

Other participants emphasised that supervision was facilitated in group sessions to support school social workers and also to discuss cases related to their fieldwork:

"I need to support them through group supervision." (Sarah, Supervisor, DSD).

"And like when we are doing that, another thing that we are doing as well, we do what we call case discussion. We discuss the cases. Why are we doing case discussions? To see how others do well with the case. How do they address this and that case? So even that one help as well as peer supervision and engage them in involved, ask them to do peer supervision so that they can learn from one another." (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

The above responses from the participants signify the role of providing supervision to social workers. The participants indicated that they provided both individual supervision and group supervision. The responses suggest that the purpose of the individual supervision was to guide the school social workers regarding their submission of reports and any challenges they may experience during their interventions.

This is consistent with the Department of Social Development & SACSSP's (2012) description of supervision as a formal arrangement where supervisees review and reflect on their work. The responses on group supervision suggest that this supervisor method can contribute to the effectiveness of school social work services as the practitioners reflect on their cases as a group, share knowledge, learn from each other, and provide peer supervision. This is evidenced by Carpenter et al. (2012), who state that group work can help develop critical thinking skills and help explore ways to attend to cases efficiently. Furthermore, group and peer supervision provide social work practitioners with a forum to discuss their practice with another practitioner (usually a senior colleague) and explore the functional aspects of their practice but also critically reflect upon the content of the practice (Ingram, 2012).

7.2.3.3 Subtheme 3.3: Offering personal and emotional support to the school social workers

The supervisor participants also reported that they offered personal and emotional support to the school social workers under their supervision, as apparent in this subtheme. Emphasis was placed on recognising the school social workers as individuals who may face their challenges and difficulties, and that the supervisors strive to create a safe and supportive environment where the school social workers feel comfortable sharing their struggles and seeking help. This is articulated in the following extracts:

"At the end of the day, social workers are human beings as well. They go through some elements of problems if I can put it that way. So I always ensure that I create a safe environment or encourage them to open up to me if they are not feeling well. I encourage that a lot to say instead of maybe someone just leaving early at work without notifying me, just to let me know that you're going through something." (Naledi, Supervisor, DSD)

"Giving them support also sometimes is personal support, maybe something is happening at home. For instance, if there's a social worker who lost her mother, then I have to give that person support." (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

"I think it goes beyond just being a supervisor and supervising. So they need to know that before being the supervisor, I am a human being, meaning that if they have challenges within their home as officials, they are welcome to confide in me as a supervisor about the challenge. For instance, they let me know if they would start maybe at the doctor's or if they are taking their child to the doctor and would run late because of this. They need that

support and know that as and when such issues happen, they're welcome to come. I think that relieves everything and anything to say." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

"I give them emotional support. Because they are also people, they may have their challenges, and there is no way that they can counsel other people if they have personal issues that they are dealing with. Mm-hmm. So I give them that emotional support" (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD).

Contrary to the above finding, Naledi and Thobile reported that they would facilitate the social workers' access to external wellness support services, such as the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), to ensure they receive the appropriate professional help:

"But again, it's my responsibility to ensure that the team has some element of external support in terms of referring them for wellness." (Naledi, Supervisor, DSD)

"Sometimes as my role, when I identify that the social workers or school social workers need to be supported, I go to the extent, that I send them for EAP. I do that sometimes and take it through myself because I'm trained to do some of it. But mostly I prefer to send them where they will be free, where they will be able to express themselves." (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

The narratives articulated above suggest the importance of supportive supervision in caring for the school social workers on the frontline in education systems. This significant responsibility is echoed by Newcomb (2021), who states that supportive supervision is important as it often assists in maintaining practitioner well-being, and by caring about them, practitioners often feel cared for and valued within their work environment. Moreover, emotional support was provided with an understanding that social workers may experience difficulties with counselling problems. This is supported by Perumal and Tanga (2020), who note that frontline workers may succumb to emotional and personal pressures that have the potential to cause stress and burnout and affect work productivity.

This finding, however, suggests that the supervisor may use the opportunity to emotionally support the school social worker to "identify and address any condition that may impair a supervisee's ability to practice social work with reasonable skill, judgment, and safety." (National Association of Social Work, 2013, p. 17). Some supervisors recognised the potential issue of maintaining boundaries with providing emotional support or well-being support to the school social workers. As such, they refrained from providing support and referred them to EAP. This

particular action is supported by the National Association of Social Work (2013), as they state that supervisors must never engage in therapeutic relationships with the supervisees. Moreover, supervisors should be aware of signs of stress, address them with the social workers, and, if necessary, provide resources to help them (National Association of Social Work, 2008), as evidenced in the participants' responses.

7.2.3.4 Subtheme 3.4: Supervisors advocate for school social work services at schools

This subtheme outlined that participants recognised that in the practice of school social work, DSD practitioners experienced challenges with school administrators and collaboration between DSD and GDE, therefore, often had to step in to advocate for school social work services and the practitioners. Specifically, in recognising the challenges that school social workers face in the school environment, as mentioned by Grace (Supervisor, DSD) *"attending to the challenges that they are experiencing as a social worker,"* the supervisor participants play a crucial role in advocating against these challenges, for the provision of appropriate resources and support for school social workers within the school environment. Naledi (Supervisor, DSD) said *"The other thing is to advocate on their behalf in terms of resources [like consultation rooms]"* while Linda (Supervisor, DSD) responded in a way that emphasised the importance of directly engaging with schools to ensure that school social workers have access to a suitable workspace to provide their services:

"What I've been doing with my social workers is that we go to every school and directly speak to them. I must say that my social workers are provided with a conducive space to provide a service because most of our social workers are complaining... when I go to the school, I want to see where the social worker will be because it has to be conducive..."

Other participants reported that they sometimes needed to intervene and advocate on behalf of the school social workers when there were challenges with collaboration within the school and departments, and in instances where access to schools and learners was a challenge for school social workers:

"In supporting them, I become an advocate at some schools. When I notice that the school is not working well with us, sometimes I advocate on behalf of my school social workers so that they will find their work to be easier, and that they will be able to reach the learners" (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

“Should there be challenges, we come in to try and provide the supervisory role between GDE and social development.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

“The education [department] has their mandate. They will tell you that we don’t want anything during contact time, but we try and negotiate with them... Maybe before we go to school, you call the principal or the person responsible. If it is their coordinator, I let them know that social workers will be coming to do one, two, three.” (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

“We engage the school inspectors. So once we invite them and call them to say this is what we are facing, or even the ISS officials from the district level, they will assist if we encounter those challenges with schools. We engage them sometimes, and it does help.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

One participant highlighted that supervisors needed to leverage their authority and position to ensure that schools take the school social workers seriously and engage with them effectively, as described by Linda: *“So as a supervisor, I must also go into the schools because I’ve worked in the schools’ programme before I became a supervisor. So one of the things that I realised is that schools don’t take social workers seriously, even though they need our support. So, when there’s a management that comes directly down to the schools and talks to them, they change their mindset.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)*

Therefore, the narratives from the participants speak to the vital responsibilities that supervisors undertake as part of advocating for school social work services and creating conducive environments (i.e., advocating for their needs, intervening in school and collaboration challenges, negotiating access to learners, leveraging authority for effective engagement, and engaging school inspectors and district officials when there are issues in the collaboration). Farkas and Romaniuk (2021) support these findings as they explain that supervisors should advocate that systematic problems are addressed and suggest how they can be resolved.

7.2.3.5 Subtheme 3.5: Empowering school social workers through mentoring and capacity building

DSD supervisors also empowered school social workers through mentoring and capacity building, as presented in this subtheme. Some participants reported that to ensure that the school social workers were empowered regarding their capacity, skills, and confidence, they offered to mentor and expose them to professional practice training. Linda reported that mentoring served as a way

to support the practitioners: *"My role is also to mentor the school social workers so that they will be able to provide the intervention to the learners"* (Linda, Supervisor, DSD).

Another participant, Ayanda (Supervisor, DSD) explained that they also aim to empower the school social workers by building their capacity and confidence:

"We have the open door policy to say, as I am stationed in the office, I am here for you 24-7 to say, should you get stuck with a case, you are welcome to come to me... I think that from our side is to say we are here to impart the knowledge and skills that we have. Even if it means I will go with you in the field and show you the ropes to ensure that we ease the burden or maybe work on and improve their self-confidence in terms of providing services because I said to you before, the social worker, they lack the assertiveness to say and stand up for themselves within a district. So I think that we can play that role to say if we go with them and maybe once in a while and say to the school, this is the roles and responsibilities that social work"

The participants also reflected on the training that school social workers needed to be capacitated to provide intervention to learners, as reported by Grace *"I am responsible for making sure that the social workers do get training and that they are capacitated"* (Grace Supervisor, DSD). Another supervisor participant noted they take a proactive approach to identifying the specific training needs of the school social workers under their supervision:

"One needs to know the people they work with, and knowing them also will inform the kinds of training they require based on the intervention on how they deliver the service to clients. So as and when the need is identified within the particular official, we then liaise with our HR department to say there is a need maybe for play therapy training because maybe most social workers have informed that they have never attended such or they lack the skills in terms of play therapy with young learners. So we will liaise with them to organise and provide such a training." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

While the above narratives suggest that this form of mentoring support is provided by supervisors to the school social workers, Gallacher (1997, p. 192) acknowledges that mentoring is often an informal process and argues that "a supervisor typically is not an individual's mentor." As such, dual roles, being a supervisor and a mentor simultaneously, may create role confusion, and attention must be paid to this.

Nevertheless, the findings show that mentoring may be provided to school social workers to strengthen their service provision to learners. Additionally, supervision requires that supervisors empower practitioners concerning their daily functions and recognise that practitioners have diverse needs and abilities (Engelbrecht, 2012; Gordon, 1992). This is evident in the findings as participants indicated that they empower school social workers, which helps build their confidence and assertiveness skills. Additionally, social workers' staff development and training needs are other areas that supervisors need to be aware of and provide the necessary support for (NASW, 2012), as reported by Grace and Ayanda in the above findings. This responsibility reflects that supervisors must be able to appropriately assess social workers' training needs while establishing specific and unique programmes for each of them. Therefore, training needed to be tailored to the needs of a specific social worker with a unique workload and encountering specific challenges, such as the lack of training in play therapy, a method that may be used to enhance counselling and therapy intervention (Shulman, 2021).

7.2.3.6 Subtheme 3.6: Enhance school partnerships through engagements with schools

Some of the DSD participants reported that they would facilitate engagements with the schools, as outlined in this subtheme. These engagements were effected through participating in meetings with school principals and staff, presentations on Acts and policies related to child protection, and training the principals on reporting and referral procedures. Ursula reported in depth that within her region, she was part of the district management teams where she would raise concerns about the challenges that affect the practice of school social work, as noted: *“I sit in the district management teams. So in some instances, you find that in IDSO will note that, you know, educators or principals are reporting cases late or they don't know how to handle cases that require psychosocial support.”* (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

Linda and Ursula highlighted that presentations were also done during staff meetings with principals and school staff: whereby they would provide information on how to report or refer and handle cases, provide information on children's Acts and the consequences of not adhering to some of those Acts:

“Our role is also to engage with the teachers to get them familiar with our policies, the children's acts and the reporting procedures, and how to report on cases. So we ensure that our schools give us some time when they're doing staff meetings so that we can go and engage with the teachers to familiarize them with our act and why it's important to

identify children and refer cases.... We also give more information on the Sexual Offense Act mainly because of the sexual offences that are done against children.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“When they have their monthly meetings with principals in the Tshwane district, they will invite me, and I will get a slot to present our services and referral systems. At the end of those meetings [with the principals], we use that opportunity to speak a lot about child abuse cases and the importance of referring. And we refer them to section 110 of the Children’s Act, the violation of it, and the consequences thereof.” (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

Additionally, to ensure that principals were familiar with the reporting protocol, Thobile noted that they provided training to a school principal with content related to completing Form 22. This training was a result of some schools reporting cases through telephone calls and not following the right process, as indicated in the following extract:

“Sometimes as a supervisor when I realized that principals of schools are not referring well. I go to the extent of training all the school principals for example, in 2022, I had to train a school principal on a child abuse reporting protocol. I have to train them on form 22 to make them know how important is this form 22 so that we’ll get more referrals, so that the school social workers will work better, because some of the challenges that school social workers experience, in schools, they want to report with mouse, schools, they want to report through the phone, and you need to check the referral. How do you check when somebody is phoning you to say, I’ve got a problem?... ” (Thobile, Supervisor, DSD)

The participants described their respective roles in improving school partnerships through various interactions. These included attending meetings with school principals and staff, delivering presentations on child protection legislation and reporting processes, and educating principals. Kemp (2014) argues that school social work practitioners are responsible for training school staff regarding policies and management of social issues.

These findings suggest that the purpose was to ensure that schools and principals understood their responsibilities under child protection legislation and could successfully identify, report, and refer incidents that may require school social work intervention, as prescribed by The Department of Basic Education (2014) in the SIAS policy. By addressing issues and offering support, it may be

argued that the supervisors contributed to ensuring that collaboration between school social workers and schools was effective, ultimately increasing children's protection and well-being.

7.2.4 Theme 4: Administration and Staffing Challenges at the Department of Social Development

This theme reflects issues at the DSD that affect the practice of school social work. Specifically, these issues are related to staffing and administration of allocated schools and cases. They are presented under the subthemes reporting on inadequate staffing levels, high school and intervention targets, the impact of high caseload and low staff levels, lack of funding for materials to use with learners, and lack of transportation to schools.

7.2.4.1 Subtheme 4.1: Inadequate staffing levels, high school allocations, and high intervention targets

One of the most significant barriers identified is the insufficient number of school social workers compared to the large number of schools they are expected to serve, as presented in this subtheme. Some participants indicated that the ratio of school social workers to schools depended on the region and district allocated to them. Some districts and regions had ratios of one school social worker to 10 or more schools:

“The ratio of social workers to schools is ridiculously high in my region where each social worker has about 10 schools upwards. But looking at other regions, they have higher numbers mostly because their regions are bigger. The ratio is way too high to provide quality services, to provide follow-up by the social worker, and it’s too high based on the challenges that children in schools are facing and the cases that are being referred.”
(Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“In my region, we have 17 social workers and about 14 districts. So, within those 14 districts, each district has four or five circuits. So, each social worker is based on a circuit. So, in each circuit, you will find that it has about 40 or 50 schools. So, the ratio of one social worker would be one to 40 or 50. So, sometimes you find that each circuit has two social workers because it’s busy and has many schools.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“The ratio is equivalent to one social worker per 20 schools. In a way, I would say that we’re doing injustice to the schools because we are not there full-time and we are juggling

schools with so many learners, much as they are not referring all of them, but most of the learners they need these services.” (Enhle, SSW, DSD)

“There are too many schools and too few social workers to go around. For example, Johannesburg, a district of Johannesburg. They've got over 1,200 schools that fall under their district. At this point, they have about 28 to 30 social workers, which include the supervisors.” (Nandi, Key Informant, DSD)

Although Martha (SSW, DSD) reported that they had only six schools to service, it was difficult to provide consistent support and attention to each one:

"With my specific situation is that I'm only able to go out once a week and have six schools. So the way I have structured my school visit schedule is by trying to attend three schools at least a week on that one day. So it becomes a challenge because even though I've scheduled to attend three schools, I find that I can only attend two schools."

Another participant reflected on the stagnant growth of school social workers under DSD noting that since 2021, additional school social workers have not been employed, instead, employment of social workers was prioritised for other DSD units such as foster care:

“Already, we are understaffed; even when they give us social workers, we are mostly forgotten. Since I got here in the department in 2021, I found school social workers being 29. Three years later, they are 28 as some leave; we are not prioritised as school social workers. When social workers are deployed, they prioritise them for foster care, not school social work.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

Apart from the barrier to good service delivery of inadequate staffing or low school social worker numbers, some of the participants reported that they had high intervention targets to achieve and that competing priorities were placed on school social workers, which put a strain on their capacity and affected the quality of their work:

“We are busy, I’m telling you, it’s crazy. And our targets are high. We have very high targets. I’ve seen even in the new financial year, our targets are quite high. They have increased. So we are busy.” (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

“More emphasis has been put on school social workers to report on many things. For instance, before we were not reporting HIV, now the department is adding an indicator to us. Our target for Ke Moja is very high and other social workers in DSD are not doing it.

Our target for services that we provide to high-risk schools is very high. The added new indicators are strenuous for us as we already have a high target for Ke Moja, which we do alone as school social workers while other units are not doing it. For example, in Tshwane, the target that they want is 6,000 from one district. Is that possible with 28 social workers? No, it's not. Otherwise, it would just not be quality service” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

Within GDE, Faith (Key Information, GDE) reported the following similar barriers:

“Currently, up until July, we have a qualified social worker as an intern who assists us a lot with social work administration, which is quite a challenge for us because we are a team of four and have to service about 2300 schools in the province, which includes your public ordinary schools and some special schools”

The above narratives suggest that there is a severe shortage of social workers within the DSD compared to the large number of school practitioners they were expected to serve. As evidenced in the participant reports, the minimum number of schools each school social worker supported was six. In comparison, the maximum was 50 schools, which is widely acknowledged as an unsustainable ratio. The ratios differed based on the region, district, and circuit the school social workers were allocated to. These narratives are consistent with Lee (2012), who concluded that major barriers to school social work were high caseloads, understaffing, and lack of time in the schools. This stark imbalance compromises the school social workers' ability to provide quality and consistent support to the learners and schools under their care.

Although there seems to be a generally large distribution of schools to school social workers, the magnitude of the impact on the effectiveness of social work services may differ based on the individual regions and districts being served. Moreover, the narratives suggest that school social workers had high targets for the HIV and the Ke Moja projects. Drew and Gonzlaz (2021) support the narrative by highlighting that in some school districts, staffing issues were evident, as there were not enough team members for the large number of learners needing the services.

Similarly, Richardson et al. (2019) found that school social workers were burdened in the schools as they had to service multiple schools, which increased the problems the learners faced in their respective schools. While this issue is similar to other contexts (Ding et al., 2023; Franklin et al., 2009; Kemp, 2014), the participant's responses suggest that the consequences of this inordinate ratio affects school social workers' ability to provide comprehensive and consistent support to the

learners and schools they serve. Inadequate staffing levels, a high number of school allocations, and high intervention targets are part of the systematic DSD issues. While most of the narratives are from DSD social workers, GDE supervisors who provide direct services to learners and schools are affected by the same problem. As noted previously and by a GDE key informant, only three GDE supervisors currently support and provide crisis intervention to schools faced with crisis incidents. This affected their administration work, and an intern was appointed on a short contract to assist with this. This employment number is too low, affecting administration and, ultimately, the service provision within school social work programmes. Using CST, this system, as evidenced in the findings, is oppressive as practitioners are burdened with cases while catering for many public schools in the Gauteng Province. Specifically, the system is deemed oppressive as they are exposed to these working conditions that McCall et al. (2023) note may affect individual autonomy and responsibility.

7.2.4.2 Subtheme 4.2: The impact of large caseloads and low staff on school social workers' responsibilities

While considering issues related to staffing, large school numbers, and high targets within DSD, this theme outlines some of the participants' reports related to the impact of these on the practice of school social work and the services provided. For instance, their administration work often suffered as they were frequently pulled away from their desks to respond to crises in the different schools:

"We defer our administrative work, most of the time we are in the field because we make weekly plans to say, on Monday I will be doing this, Tuesday, Wednesday, and so on. But then your weekly plan changes, for example maybe today I want to do my admin and then I get a call from the school saying that there's a crisis in a certain school, and I then need to go to that school. So it means that on my last day, I need to do your administrative work. It is a challenge because one would find that maybe the files I am behind with are needed as if something's not on a paper, then there is no evidence." (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

"Being short-staffed also affects our admin. I have to say that admin is not in good order because of the nature of the cases that we receive. We are always busy." (Olivia, SSW, DSD)

In addition, some of the participants also highlighted the challenges of managing high caseloads while trying to balance various responsibilities, such as conducting home visits, as noted by Naledi (SSW, DSD): *"For instance, social workers are attending to about six to seven schools alone and*

they have to conduct home visits and all of that so it becomes a bit of a challenge." Another participant explained that because of the high caseload, school social workers did not have time to conduct follow-ups on cases where intervention had been provided, and this affected the effectiveness of the intervention rendered:

"Sometimes, the cases with families need to be followed up on. You provide an intervention. After a while, that intervention, you need to go back and assess if the intervention you have provided is working right. However, our social workers do not have time to go back to assess or evaluate the services they've provided because they are already running around with other cases that are coming through. So because of this, you find other cases where families relapse." (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

As evidenced in the narratives, the high number of schools assigned to each school social worker, attending to crisis cases, and being short-staffed affected the DSD school social workers' capabilities to complete their administration work and conduct follow-ups and home visits. This created significant challenges for the school social workers in managing their workload and schedules. Lee (2012) draws similar conclusions that the overwhelming demand to address immediate emergencies in the different schools and subsequent incidents hinders their ability to focus on less pressing tasks. Consequently, these priorities may adversely affect follow-ups on cases with families, as reported by the participants.

7.2.4.3 Subtheme 4.3: Lack of funding for materials to use with the learners

Some participants reported the lack of funding for materials for group work and preventative programmes, as apparent in this subtheme. In their responses, some indicated that they often have to use their own funds to purchase materials and resources needed for the programmes and activities they conduct with learners and that they could not provide learners with some incentives for their participation:

"Funding is an issue when we do programs with children. For example, sometimes I pop out money from my pocket, and depending on what program we want to do, we buy the things needed to do the programme. For example, in group work, you need to have child-friendly activities. At the same time, primary school children understand through play, observations, and seeing you doing something. That's where they get to understand more what you are talking to them about." (Thabile, Supervisor, DSD).

“Sometimes I know the funding is not easy. Maybe the department can offer or give me at least five school bags each month. I’ll go and conduct programs in this school. Then I will see around in that school who really needs the school bag or reward learners actively participating and doing well in that program.” (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

“I started as a school social worker, and it looked like there would be a budget that I’m given yearly to buy things for the office and everything. But I don’t have any budget for my office to improve support and get more resources for play therapy.” (Tamia, SSW, SGB)

This perception of the need for incentives such as a school bag or light snacks was motivated by Uthando (SSW, DSD) who further went on to explain that in some of her encounters, learners were demotivated to attend programmes by school social workers and this made it challenging for the school social workers to engage them effectively:

“Because, like now, when I’m conducting the program, one of the learners once said, you are back again social work empty-handed, as always. I was a little embarrassed. If there were resources like bags, it would be nice. Learners would be motivated to come and actively enjoy it. For some, they walk out. Some learners won’t get food during lunch, or you can’t offer anything to the child, not even a light snack. You can’t offer anything. And even if you try to buy something for that one learner you identified as hungry with your own money, 10 other learners will ask you to buy for them as well.”

Wendy shared similar experiences regarding providing refreshments or light meals for learners when conducting school programmes. In their responses, they reported that they are unable to provide catering or refreshments for learners during their programmes, which can be a significant barrier, especially for programmes targeting vulnerable groups like teenage mothers:

“We run our programs without any budget... Our department doesn’t always have money, we are not able to give the learners anything. Can you imagine that we are expected to have teenage pregnancy programs? For teenage moms to come to the program, you must secure food. You have to have catering. So we don’t have that budget for catering...” (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

The above responses from participants, DSD, and SGB social workers indicate that they agree that refreshments, incentives and play therapy tools are required in any educational programme with children. As a result, the responses suggest that a lack of funding for school social work

programmes impacts not only learners' immediate involvement but also the success of interventions targeted at aiding at-risk learners and delivering meaningful educational experiences. Although the DSD social workers appreciated tools such as laptops and cell phone devices, as reported in the previous theme, the issue of the lack of funding for the actual school programmes is concerning. Participants employed within DSD and GDE experienced this issue. Therefore, both DSD and GDE it may be argued have a role to play in capacitating the social workers regarding resources. As such, the prevailing problem of inadequate funding for preventative programmes and individual sessions is not unique and may be understood within the larger framework of South Africa's education system, where budget crises have been observed.

The Department of Basic Education's budget has not kept up with inflation, resulting in insufficient school resources, directly influencing the quality of education and support services provided to learners (Esterhuizen, 2023). Addressing budget shortages in DSD and GDE is critical for increasing the quality of programmes that help vulnerable people in educational settings. As noted in the findings, the lack of funding for school social work intervention and programmes aligns with the insight from CST regarding systematic marginalisation.

According to the theory, oppression may occur not only explicitly through the low allocation of budget or denial of resources but also through ways in which systems limit the practitioners' ability to meet essential learner needs. The specific inadequate funding observed in DSD and GDE can be seen as systematic oppression, which may be argued to undermine the efforts to provide equitable support to learners in need.

7.2.4.4 Subtheme 4.4: Lack of transportation to schools affects the practice of school social work

This subtheme highlights that DSD social workers experienced challenges with travelling to the different schools they serviced. Some participants reported that the number of vehicles available to the school social workers not stationed in schools is severely limited. In some instances, multiple social workers have to share a single vehicle. The below extracts reflect the lack of transportation as an issue:

“Sometimes there is no vehicle to transport us because in our district we only have two cars and we are nine social workers.” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“With the DSD, as much as they provide us human resources, they don't always have the resources like transport to get to the home for home visits.” (Faith, Key Informant, GDE)

"The issue of transport is a problem for school social work.... In the province, the ratio of one car is equal to six social workers. However, that ratio cannot apply to school social workers." (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

"My unit has seven social workers with only one car. So it's a challenge. And then schools will be expecting social workers to be at school, and social workers work Monday to Friday in different schools, but it's impossible because the officials have to share that resource...." (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

Other participants elaborated on the impact of sharing vehicles. Specifically, this led to significant scheduling challenges, as they had to coordinate their visits to schools based on the availability of limited transportation resources and prioritising cases:

"If maybe all of us have a crisis, then it means that we have to share the car, or sometimes someone needs to go and work on that case and give another person the car afterwards. And it might be late by the time another one works on her case." (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

"In my team, five of us share one car, meaning I can only go out once a week. So, I can only attend to my cases on a schedule; I can only go once a week. And then alternatively, if maybe one of my other colleagues is not going out, that is when I will take an opportunity to use the vehicle.... So basically, there's five of us, so we're just getting one day each." (Martha, SSW, DSD)

"We have two cars from our side. As much as I want to attend to that particular case, I don't have a car for that particular day, or there is the case that was reported before the case I reported today, of which I had made arrangements to say I'll come and visit that particular school to attend to the first case. So, that case will suffer because the social worker is one person. They cannot be in two schools at the same time. So it means as much as they will have to assess which is more agent than the other." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

"In that one car, there are eight social workers, meaning every Friday, they have to sit down and plan together to see who's getting a car on this day. Sometimes, we also encourage them to drop one another. So, yeah, it becomes a challenge even if we are working through it." (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

“.... Seven officials share one car. So, it becomes challenging. So, they have resorted to pairing themselves. And pairing means if I drive, I'll have to make sure that I drop off Gift and Thando* in the same place before I reach my school.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)*

Two participants whose offices were in the GDE districts and the DSD regional offices, respectively, expressed that even though they could request a second car for their school social workers, the department would prioritise other programmes such as educational exam activities and distributing food parcels. Ultimately, this affected the practice of school social work and services to schools and learners:

“In our district, we've got nine officials. They're using one car from Social Development and one car offered by the Department of Education.... When it's exam time, we don't get a car from the Department of Education because they have to monitor the examination. And sometimes we'll find that even the car from the social development is to go for a car service. Then there are those days when crises or a need to go [to the school], and our social workers cannot offer the services.” (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

“If you need a second car, you have to negotiate with the transport officer to assist with another car.... Now, there are a lot of programs in DSD. They will prioritise those programs. Maybe the sustaining livelihood [unit] distributes food parcels, and they will prioritise that unit. The school social workers will not have cars to go and conduct their visits or school visits because there will be no cars available.” (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

Other participants reflected on the distance social workers travel to reach schools. Although their views differ as in some regions schools were far from the social work offices and the vehicles were reported to be in poor conditions, in some regions, schools were close to the offices, but they shared similar sentiments that the number of vehicles was not sufficient:

“In my district, we travel more than 50 kilometres to reach our schools. So we only use one car, and it is five social workers. This means everyone gets to go to school once a week, yet cases are reported daily... School social workers travel long distances to schools, and even the car is not in good condition. Due to the long travelling distances, they're unable to see many learners and families when they get to school, so you find that they only go to school to attend to two or more children. Still, they're unable to engage those children's families, and you find that they need to engage them.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

"Yeah, from our side, our schools are not that far off from the region. This means that the transport department cannot allocate as many cars as we would like. So transport becomes a challenge for us..." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

The above narratives from the DSD participants indicate that the lack of transport or vehicles for social workers in DSD and GDE is a barrier to school social work practice. These concerns were reflected by the DSD social workers placed in DSD regional offices and those placed within the GDE district officers. The narratives show that the participants could not be at their allocated schools daily or weekly due to a lack of vehicles, as the available cars (i.e., usually one or two) were being shared amongst the practitioners. Social workers sometimes could not respond to school crises because other practitioners used vehicles in the field. In some instances, cars were allocated based on which cases were deemed to need priority intervention.

Participants also indicated that requests for second or additional cars were not always granted at DSD and GDE as the departments would prioritise other activities, such as monitoring school examinations or distributing food parcels. As a result of these transport and vehicle-related difficulties, school social workers' ability to respond to cases in a timely and holistic manner was severely restricted. Moreover, this undermines the school social worker's capacity to provide effective and responsive support to learners and their families.

Although the literature is limited on this issue faced in school social work practice, the narratives are consistent with Lesesa (2022), who found a lack of vehicles as a barrier to practitioners' intervention and argued for vehicles to support the intervention required in schools. This barrier significantly compromises their ability to intervene in urgent cases and conduct necessary follow-up visits, ultimately hindering their effectiveness. A noted theoretical ambiguity is how school social workers normalise these injustices, which, guided by the CST (Dant, 2003), often seek to address with their clients.

7.2.5 Theme 5: Administration, structural and logistics constraints at the schools

In this study, some participants reported that school social workers face barriers related to administration processes and institutional structures at the school level. This theme categorises these barriers as school staff's reluctance to complete reporting forms, non-functioning school management structures, coordinating school access for preventative programmes, and lack of space for one-on-one intervention with learners.

7.2.5.1 Subtheme 5.1: School staff's reluctance to complete Form 22

This subtheme outlined that some school staff were reluctant to complete the reporting of cases on Form 22. Specifically, some participants from DSD highlighted the significant challenges social workers face in ensuring that mandatory reporting procedures, such as the completion of Form 22, are followed by teachers and school staff when reporting cases. For instance, some participants reported that teachers are often reluctant to complete the mandatory Form 22, which is required when reporting cases of child abuse and which is useful for social workers to track and follow up on cases effectively:

“With cases of abuse, the teachers do not want to complete the mandatory Form 22. They want to send cases verbally, which limits accountability because if a case is not reported in writing, it makes it difficult for me to see how many cases are possible because I have to register these cases on the case register so that I can have records and get their progress.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

“We are also mandated by law if a school has been informed of the child being abused, they are required to fill in Form 22, but we are struggling with this. We always emphasise that if a child has reported abuse, the teachers are required to fill in Form 22, and then we take it and send it to our canalisation office to be sent to Pretoria.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

“Because of every case, I must get a referral form and correct referral procedures. That's also a big challenge. I don't take verbal cases. I need that in writing on a form for my file for DSD as well. The supervisor will need to see the cases that I'm dealing with. So now teachers will just call out of nowhere to say 'Hey, please, where are you? Are you around? Can you pass by the school? There's a learner that I think needs you.' I then asked if it was a crisis, and they said it was not... My question is, why can't they do the right thing? They know that they cannot just verbally report the cases about learners; they need to write them down. It's a small form, but teachers don't want to do that. They will tell you that they are busy.” (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

Regarding the completion of reporting forms, another participant, Grace (Supervisor, DSD), indicated that some teachers are hesitant to complete Form 22 due to concerns about the legal implications: *“The new Form 22 says to the teachers that if the learner is reporting a case to them, they must complete the Form 22 and make sure that the case is reported to the police and*

before you refer. Then they will say no, they would rather involve our union and don't want to be called to court."

While some schools still make referrals through verbal reporting and do not follow the right methods of completing the reporting form, other participants reported that this affected service provision for the learners as those cases were left unattended: *"I follow up on cases to see if the cases have been attended to. But that's where we have a lot of challenges when it comes to referrals. Most schools are not complying with that. That's why some of the cases are not attended to."* (Linda, Supervisor, DSD),

The above narratives indicate that school social workers from DSD in the School Social Work programme encounter considerable challenges when guaranteeing adherence to mandatory reporting protocols, namely in completing Form 22. The narrative shows teachers and school staff do not always complete Form 22. Still, they verbally report cases to school social workers, making it difficult for school social workers and their supervisors to monitor those cases.

This hesitancy to complete Form 22 was also indicated to be due to the legal implications of teachers and school staff being called to court as referrers of the cases. Considering these narratives, KZNDOE (2015, p.12) supports the expectations that the participants have of school staff as it noted that "by being an educator and working with children, educators must report any case of child abuse that they either suspect, or is reported by the learner to them, or is reported to them by another person or any form of abuse that they have witnessed."

Furthermore, the narratives are supported by Section 110 of the Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005, which highlights that teachers who, on reasonable grounds, conclude that a child has been abused in a manner causing physical injury, sexually abused, or deliberately neglected, must report that in the prescribed Form 22, and they must report any belief of such instances to designated social workers from DSD (KZNDOE, 2015). The lack of adherence to reporting regulations, as indicated by the participants, significantly impedes the capacity of school social workers to monitor and pursue instances of child abuse efficiently, therefore affecting the delivery of services for impacted learners and the overall practice of school social work.

7.2.5.2 Subtheme 5.2: Challenges posed by non-functional School Management Structures

Non-functioning school management structures were reported as a barrier that affected school social work practice in the Gauteng province, as apparent in this subtheme. Most of the

participants from DSD highlighted the significant challenges that school social workers face when the school management structures, particularly the SBSTs, are not functioning effectively. Their responses indicated that non-functioning SBSTs were observed when it was unclear which school staff should be the liaison with the social workers. In some instances, the SBST coordinator was responsible for a wide range of functions, often single-handedly, which compromised the support structure:

“If this SBST is not functional at the school, then it poses a challenge to empower that particular school in terms of what to do when that term of challenge arises. Also, if there’s no functional SBST, when we go to school, sometimes you deal with this person and tomorrow there’s another new person and you see there’s no consistency. So if you have that particular person to know or that team, because SBST is different people that you work with at the school, then you empower those people with information.” (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

“So you’ll find that the school has a leadership problem... In most of the schools, you’ll find that only one educator who is the SBST, coordinates the whole functions of SBST in which they’re responsible for health, psychosocial health, sports, (quite) several activities at SBST coordination And once that person is not at school, then the school doesn’t know even where to begin. They don’t know their stakeholders. They don’t know who is who to contact.” (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

“Sometimes you’ll find that the principal gets another post, or the teacher responsible for the referrals gets another job; most of the time, as social workers dealing with that person, we are not informed about their job change. This affects referrals as some of the staff will decide to refer not to you because they don’t know the processes.” (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

Faith (Key informant, GDE) echoed similar sentiments, highlighting that due to the non-existence of SBSTs, learners’ difficulties are often missed: *“So I think just the start where sometimes matters fall through the cracks is because schools don’t have school-based support teams or somebody mandated to do that.”*

As a result of non-functional SBSTs, some participants reported inconsistencies in the level of preparedness and cooperation from schools when school social workers visit to provide support

and interventions. In their responses, it was reported that some schools do not adequately prepare for the school social workers' visits or follow the necessary protocols:

"With some of my schools, I find that when attending to their learners, sometimes they don't prepare or follow what is required of them. Sometimes I have to wait a while, like when I tell them I will arrive at 10. When I get there, they haven't prepared, they still go to look for the children, and then you have to wait for them to find the child, and sometimes you go there and you find that the child is not at school, and already had prepared the school that I will be coming to provide intervention." (Martha, SSW, DSD)

"Currently, the schools don't make arrangements for you and the child, even when they know you are coming. If they were, then as soon as social workers arrive at the school, they give them that opportunity to see the child, interview the child, then it's done." (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

The above extracts signify the issue of non-functioning SBSTs and the impact on the services and interventions provided to learners and schools, as experienced by the DSD and GDE participants. Specifically, the extracts suggest that in some schools, no specific SBST members are responsible for the psychosocial intervention process for school social work services. In some instances, only one member coordinated all SBST functions. This affected the collaborative partnerships between the participants, and the schools on on-going referred cases did not have a school contact person.

In some schools, the contact person would have formally left the school, but the participants were not informed. Moreover, non-functioning SBSTs resulted in a lack of preparedness for school social work intervention with the individual learners, as the participants' narrative suggested that social workers would arrive at the school and the learners would not be prepared for individual interventions.

The collaboration partnership is a core function of SBSTs, as Fourie (2017) explains that the teams must be highly networked within the school and its broader community. This network helps link the learners with possible services, such as school social work services when necessary (Makhalemele et al., 2021; Tsotetsi & Omodan, 2020), and when SBSTs are non-functional, the services are compromised. Moreover, SBSTs may contribute to ensuring that schools effectively prepare for school social work services with vulnerable learners or learners experiencing learning barriers.

From an SCT, Berger and Luckmann (1942, 1991) put forth that shared meaning and expectations are constructed over time as communities and people continuously interact and participate in social activities repeatedly. The activities are routine and institutionalised, and in the case of collaboration challenges noted in the participants' narratives, it may be argued that these challenges exist due to a lack of shared expectations and meaning behind support services in education systems. Consequently, without shared social meanings, routines and expectations, intervention for learners becomes fragmented as school social workers and SBST do not have a collective understanding how processes to prepare to psychosocial support services.

7.2.5.3 Subtheme 5.3: Challenges with coordinating access to schools for preventative programmes

Most participants reported that some schools are still unwilling to welcome and accommodate school social work services. Their responses reflected that school social workers struggled to access learners specifically for school awareness programmes for various reasons, including schools prioritising teaching and learning and limited contact time.

"When we render like school talk and awareness programs, sometimes it's a challenge because schools will tell you now they are writing exams or they are doing assessments."
(Khethani, SSW, DSD)

"Well, the learners are not easily accessible. They don't give us time to deal with the psychosocial support to the learners because even they have a lot in their academic timetable." (Sarah, SSW, DSD)

"You do have school principals unwilling to welcome school social workers into their schools. Who always will give school social workers the attitude that they are very busy and that their school is a teaching school, it's not a school for social work services."
(Thabile, Supervisor, DSD)

"Yeah, we still have those challenges even if some of the principals are willing and accommodating, but some is still a challenge as they don't want to give us access."
(Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

"Due to the curriculum priorities within the school, often social workers cannot access those learners... a lot of people who are anti-school social work program as they are

resistant because they almost feel as if social workers are interfering in the school setting.”
(Nandi, Key Informant, DSD)

Participants highlighted that schools often restrict the access to learners during regular school hours for awareness programmes, citing the need to prioritise teaching and learning, as such had to consider arranging to run the programmes after school hours. However, this option posed an additional challenge as learners needed to get home, and some used scholar transport:

“Another barrier, I can say, is contact time at school. Sometimes, we want to do our programs. They will say it is contact time and suggest you come at two o’clock. After two o’clock, learners use the transport to go home. So now it’s become a challenge to do our programmes at the school.” (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

“... they will be telling us that I’m here to teach and learn, whatever you need to do, it has to be after school, which is impossible. Most of our school learners use transport. So after school is not an option as learners run to their transport...” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“Another problem, when you propose to say, let’s do the programmes when the school knocks out in the afternoon, the learners want to go home, they can’t even stay. So we need to just work within the school hours. So it is a challenge on that” (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

“The schools sometimes think that education is the only thing that matters. So they sometimes overlook the well-being of the learner... Most learners stay far away, and they use transport to go home. So no afterschool interventions can happen because most of them use transport.” (Tamia, SSW, SGB)

The narratives related to limited access to schools and learners due to school staff prioritising teaching and learning cement the practical challenges that school social workers face in providing preventative services and not responding to crises. Contrary to Timms and Thoburn (2006), who stated that children frequently reported difficulties with accessing social work services when needed due to social workers not availing themselves, returning calls requesting support, and showing up for scheduled meetings, the narrative included in this subtheme indicates that schools limited access to school social workers.

As evidenced in the participants’ responses, this may be due to various reasons, including exam preparations, pressures caused by packed timetables, and limited contact time for teaching and learning. It may also be argued that issues of access to learners may also be due to the lack of

understanding on how to integrate school social work services better to align with the school curriculum, ensuring that programmes take place during school contact time.

On the other hand, when some schools allocated time to the school social work programmes, participants expressed that time was not sufficient. In some instances, programme content was not entirely covered because of time constraints; the content was delivered while learners had their lunch, and time constraints compromised the need to create comfortable spaces for learners to openly share their concerns in the groups:

"With social behaviour change, you need at least three hours, you know, for one session. And really, you don't have that time. The school doesn't have that time, you know... there will be times when I'm able to see the learners before school out, and some of them are using transport, so I end up not covering the content for the day." (Enhle, SSW, DSD)

"The access time, especially when it comes to the programs, you'll find that you are given a very limited time. Like, normally they will use the life orientation period and it's for almost 30 minutes." (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

"When we do the awareness programs, they will simply tell you, make sure that it's only 30 minutes. By the time I reach 30 minutes, the kids are now starting to be comfortable opening up and wanting to ask questions. But unfortunately, this is the time that I was given. There was 30 minutes. Yeah, that's the only time the school can give me because they also don't have the time." (Sarah, SSW, DSD)

Other participants reported that learners were provided with social work services during the day during their lunchtime, physical education, and reading periods:

"So what would happen is during the day, the only times that I would get is when the learners go for physical education, or they go to the reading class... which does not get into the report. So I take them during those periods." Tamia (SSW, SBG)

"The golden rule in education is that you should not disturb teaching and learning, and because learners use transport after school, social workers have to see the child during break time." (Faith, Supervisor, DSD)

"I have to try and negotiate with the learners to say that we have a lot of content to cover, so can we sacrifice our lunch break just for you guys to eat while I'm delivering the content." (Enhle, SSW, DSD)

As evidenced in the above narratives from the DSD and SGB social workers, time limits on school social work programmes considerably hamper the effectiveness of interventions intended to promote social behavioural change among learners. Considering that in some cases, the participants were sometimes given thirty minutes to engage in the programmes and essential discussions, it might be difficult for them to cultivate an atmosphere conducive to open dialogue and meaningful involvement. The above extracts also infer the need for schools to re-evaluate how they allot time for school social work efforts. This is because sufficient time is necessary for developing true ties and efficiently meeting learners' requirements (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

In the absence of adequate time, the potential impact of these programmes is greatly decreased, which ultimately affects the well-being of the learners they intend to serve and the practice of school social work. CST considers that education systems can act as sites for oppression, marginalisation, and potential liberation (Leonardo, 2004).

The former is the limited time for social work intervention, suggesting how educational institutions may prioritise other learning and curriculum activities over the holistic development of learners' well-being. It may be argued that the limited time, such as 30 minutes for intervention, is not merely a logistical issue but a manifestation of a system that does not fully value, comprehend and invest in learners' emotional and psychosocial needs, thereby perpetuating inequalities and problems.

Despite social workers' efforts to arrange programmes in advance through collaboration with SBST coordinators and the development of year plans, some participants reported facing challenges in implementing these programmes. Specifically, challenges with implementation were related to SBST coordinators not informing school administrators and staff that social workers would be running a programme and the coordinators not following the agreed-upon devised year plan for social work programmes:

“But even if we did make a call to make arrangements to conduct the programme, you’ll find that the coordinator forgot maybe to inform the principal. When you are at school in the morning, the principal will say they didn’t know you were coming. So then, in other words, if we are doing a program, it has to be postponed.” (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

“Sometimes you do a yearly plan, but when you do a yearly plan, you give the schools, but that year plan is not even followed. Sometimes when you work with the SBST and you try

to align yourself in their plans, doing a year plan together, but sometimes it's not being followed.” (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

To the contrary, Linda (SSW, DSD) reported that negotiations were held with some schools to align the preventative programmes with the curriculum, which helped facilitate their implementation:

“In some schools, we negotiate regarding some of the topics we are tackling. If it is in line with the curriculum, for instance, if this term we are dealing with substance abuse, then we do the awareness but not from the academic point of view, but from the social issue point of view... The learners are empowered. This is not necessarily to say we give them information for them to pass, but to see socially how they get assisted in terms of, you see, we empower them with that. So yeah, some of the schools allow us to do the programmes because of the curriculum part, and there is an alignment.”

The above responses about issues related to the logistics of implementing preventative programmes in schools in instances where SBST has agreed to accommodate school social work services suggest that the collaborative partnership in some schools is not adhered to and respected. As indicated by the participants, there was a lack of communication between SBST coordinators about preventative programmes, and year plans were not followed. These participant responses are consistent with Bink et al.'s (2024) review, concluding that access and logistics constraints were frequently mentioned as barriers to school social work practice in research.

In CST, Habermas (1984) introduces the concept of an ideal speech situation, acknowledging communication is compromised in unjust systems, such as the educational environments in which social workers operate, due to personal agendas and similar factors. The distortion is socially constructed and surpasses interpersonal disparities, as demonstrated by findings indicating the absence of clear communication channels concerning social services programmes within the school.

This underscores the marginalisation of preventative social work programmes in favour of other educational priorities. The logistic constraints and issues with integrating school social work services were sometimes avoided when the preventative programmes were aligned with the curriculum. Practically, this meant that the programmes needed to match what the social ills content learners were academically focused on as per curriculum (e.g., substance abuse).

7.2.5.4 Subtheme 5.4: Lack of space for supporting one-on-one intervention for learners

As outlined in this subtheme, social workers who were not stationed in schools faced challenges regarding the lack of appropriate and confidential spaces within schools to conduct their work effectively. The majority of the participants reported that they often struggled to find suitable rooms or offices to meet with learners and provide counselling or therapeutic services, therefore, forcing the school social workers to conduct sessions in less-than-ideal locations (e.g., principal's office, staff rooms, libraries, under trees):

“Other schools will sometimes say that they don't have a classroom or any space where I can get privacy to see a particular learner. Some of the schools they try, but in other schools, it's a challenge for them to improve.... It's a challenge because sometimes other principals compromise their own offices. However, when you occupy the principal's office, people will be knocking and that affects the trust you are trying to build with that learner.” (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

“Infrastructure has to be a problem because not all schools can have us and provide that safe space. For me to conduct the therapy, I sometimes find that the only space that they can give you is the staffroom or the library, where teachers and learners would be in and out and this tends to disrupt the process.” (Enhle, SSW, DSD)

“I sometimes conduct counselling sessions under the tree because maybe the principal is busy in his or her office. Sometimes as I am waiting at reception to attend the learner and they are there, you can see that the child can't wait to talk to you but there is no private space... But sometimes I don't have a choice but to see the learner under a tree because there is no space at some of the schools.” (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

“They meet the learner in the staff room where teachers are coming and going, or under the tree. So no space will provide a conducive environment, ensure confidentiality is free, and come to share whatever they want.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

“Especially in our older schools, there isn't a private and confidential space to meet with learners. Sometimes, the learners don't want to come out for help because they're going to sit with the social worker in the principal's office or the secretary's office which they are sometimes not comfortable with” (Faith, Key Informant, GDE)

Other participants reported that in some instances the sessions with individual learners were held in the cars to ensure confidentiality and some privacy, as explained in the following responses:

“If there is no space for learners to be seen by the social workers. So sometimes they have engagements with learners within the GG car.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

“They are sometimes forced to conduct interviews in the car, it is not a conducive space but at least it is a private space....” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

Another participant expressed frustration with having to negotiate for spaces every time they visit a school and the lack of consideration from teachers when learners were seen in the staffrooms:

“Some schools don’t care, you have to see yourself out. I try to go around the classes to look for an empty class. You check if the staff room is empty or what. Sometimes we use the staff room and teachers just come and start laughing, start speaking. You know, I don’t know if they don’t care or they don’t see what’s happening, but they can see that the social worker is here, and she with a learner.” (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

Although Wendy also emphasised that the lack of private and confidential spaces in schools poses a major challenge for the school social workers, she acknowledged that this was exacerbated by the fact that many schools are overcrowded, with all available office spaces already occupied:

“Schools don’t have a safe environment to do interviews. Addressing that challenge is difficult because schools have structures in place. So we just negotiate every time. And it’s not all the schools, but some schools are so overcrowded that all the office spaces are occupied.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

The narratives mentioned above shed light on significant challenges that DSD and GDE social workers face, such as a lack of suitable and confidential areas within some schools, making it difficult to carry out their work obligations properly. These challenges stem from these social workers not being placed within the school, unlike the SGB-employed social workers. Contrary to Bink et al.'s (2024) research, participants in this study stated that they frequently struggle to find appropriate rooms or offices within schools to maintain privacy and create an environment conducive to their interventions and counselling sessions with learners. The majority of schools cannot provide ‘safe spaces’ for school social workers, resulting in these professionals being obliged to use open staff rooms, libraries, or the principal's office, which are often disruptive, lack

privacy, and violate the confidentiality of their meetings with learners (National Association of Social Workers, n.d).

In certain cases, school social work support interventions were required to conduct sessions under trees and in social workers' vehicles. Although the vehicles provided some privacy and confidentiality, such measures are not conducive to therapeutic interventions. It is worth noting that some school schools in the Gauteng province struggle with overcrowding, which is caused by the large number of learners per class and insufficient classrooms to cater to those learners (Ntuta & Schurink, 2010; Tshangana et al., 2023).

Therefore, it is not shocking that social workers would find spacing or getting one-on-one consultation rooms an issue in the schools they serve. This is echoed by Williams (2010), who explains that the lack of space may be linked to a bigger contextual issue in South African schools related to the general lack of space for teaching and learning, which puts strain on many schools. Moreover, this meant that the school social workers constantly negotiated for suitable spaces whenever they visited the school. Similar to Bink et al. (2024), the narratives from the participants suggest that appropriate access to space may help to increase the attraction and exposure of school social work services.

As such, the ability of school social workers to effectively engage with learners, build rapport, create trust, and maintain the necessary level of privacy for their interventions is significantly hampered by the lack of sufficient and confidential locations within schools. This is further supported by Khumalo and Pretorius (2024) as their pilot study found that adolescent confidentiality and rapport-building can be compromised by a lack of designated spaces, leading to overheard conversations, discomfort, anxiety, and hindering the therapeutic process, as well as affecting the quality of social work services.

7.2.6 Theme 6: Role confusion and perception issues

This theme reflects confusion around the role of social workers in education systems and related perceived issues that school social workers experience when providing services to Gauteng public schools. The confusion, as highlighted in the different subthemes, stems from teachers, school personnel, and social workers themselves.

7.2.6.1 Subtheme 6.1: Lack of understanding and confusion about the role of school social work services by teachers

This subtheme highlights the responses from the participants related to the lack of understanding and confusion about the roles of school social workers in school social work services. As evidenced in the responses, most of the participants shared various practice experiences where their role was misunderstood and confused by school administrators and personnel.

For instance, Eleanor (SSW, DSD) explained that their role was confusing as teachers would pass their work to school social workers, and in some cases, they were confused with providing educational assessments for learners struggling academically: “... *sometimes they don't know our role in schools and you may find that they want to take their work and give it to us. Sometimes there would be children who are struggling academically and need to be referred to special schools, the teachers would be confused as to whether we are the ones who are supposed to assess the children or somebody else must assess the children.*” Another participant noted that: “*Sometimes they do not always understand my role as a school social worker. Like, they don't even include me in any of their meetings and they discuss learners*” (Tamia, SSW, SGB)

Expanding on this issue of misunderstanding of school social workers' roles, other participants reflected that there was an expectation that whatever issues occurred in the school setting that did not involve the curriculum had to be referred for school social worker service. From their perspectives, not all cases required school social work intervention:

“The cases are from the school's SBST coordinator, someone who has limited information or does not have information about social workers. So they will refer to every little case they will refer.” (Martha, SSW, DSD).

“So the same as issues of birth certificates. Schools will refer a case where a child needs a birth certificate, where it can easily be sorted out by just directing the parents to home affairs.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD).

Uthando (SSW, DSD) highlighted the challenge of school personnel not differentiating between crises that require immediate intervention and regular cases that can be addressed through normal channels:

“There are cases that are not crises. They can't differentiate between a crisis and a case. Crisis: I have to stop whatever I'm doing and go to school. For example, maybe a child goes to the teacher and reports that yesterday they were raped. That is a crisis, the referral

form will come at a later stage. I will have to speak to the school and attend to their case, but some cases are not a crisis matter. So now they want every case to be treated like it's a crisis, forgetting that I am not working for one school." (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

Another participant reported that school personnel would refer cases to the school social workers that were outside of their expertise such as issues related to school admissions:

"You also find that with the admissions, then they will say if they have challenges of admission at schools, they want to refer the child to the social worker, what does the social worker do, but they do have their policies, they know their policies, but sometimes they will shift the responsibilities to social workers." (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

Other participants reported that school personnel often do not understand and recognise the school social workers as trained professionals with their ethical principles and practices. Even in instances where efforts were made to clarify the school social work roles to the teachers, it was reported that they forgot:

"The school personnel themselves don't understand what is social work and that we are trained social workers who went to university with professional principles, and codes of ethics that are guiding us. They treat us like we are teachers and we're one of them, but we are not. Sometimes when you tell them, no, this is how I work as a social worker, they don't understand but they want to work the way it suits them." (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

"We are not recognised now and then. It's like people don't understand what we are doing. But I'm trying to explain to them. We are doing social work. It is the social work. The only difference is that we are focusing on learners. But it's like social work, normal social work, but our focus is only at school." (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

"I work with the SBST teachers and I think some of them don't know what is school social work... Let me just put it like that. They have their expectations, which I don't know of. Hmm. So, I always have to explain myself. I always have to remind them what is a social worker and about my role. But every time I go to the school, they forget, they don't know." (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

The above narratives from the different participants emphasise the significant challenges that school social workers face in terms of a lack of understanding of their roles and school social work practice, as well as inappropriate referrals from schools, teachers, and SBSTs. These findings

regarding the limited knowledge of school social work practice and the roles of SBST coordinators are consistent with Gherardi and Whittlesey-Jerome (2017), who explained that school personnel often do not understand the school social work practice.

As evidenced in the participants' responses, the inappropriate referrals often involved minor issues, shifting responsibilities, lack of differentiation between crises and regular cases, and issues outside the school social worker's expertise. McDavitt et al. (2018) and Van Sittert and Wilson (2018) support these responses as the teaching staff often misunderstand social workers' roles and skills in the school environment. Similarly, Csók and Pusztai (2022, p. 11) found that teachers "do not know the professionals working methods and competence limits, so they assign them different roles and expect those problems to be solved, even though they are tasks not belonging to the social worker".

This role confusion can lead to inefficient use of the school social worker's time and resources. It may compromise their ability to effectively address the more pressing needs of learners and their families. The findings are further supported by Lee (2012), who identified the major barrier in their study to be the lack of recognition and understanding of social work roles and suggested it is likely that lack of understanding and recognition of social work roles is closely related to lack of funding for social work services in schools.

7.2.6.2 Subtheme 6.2: School Social workers are perceived as outsiders, undermined, and intimidated by some teachers

There was also a perception among some of the participants that school social workers in school social work services were seen as outsiders, rather than an integral part of the school community., as apparent in this subtheme This could further undermine the school social workers' ability to build trust and establish effective working relationships with schools. Linda (Supervisor, DSD) stated that schools do not take school social workers seriously, even though they desperately need their support, *"So one of the things that I realized is that schools don't take social workers seriously, even though they need our support."* (Linda, Supervisor, DSD), while another participant noted that school social workers are seen as outsiders who are only called upon when needed, *"Rather than us, who are seen as being outsiders, we come as and when we are required in schools. So we still have a long way."* (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD). Other participants expressed feeling intimidated and inferior in the school setting because some teachers would "undermine," "be bossy," or "bully" the school social workers and expect them to execute activities that were not within their professional scope:

"Some teachers will just choose to undermine or to be bossy or to be bully or whatsoever and expect you to do things that are not your roles..." (Uthando, SSW, DSD).

"Sometimes it's a matter of teachers, being teachers to everyone, even social workers. And they will tell them how to do their job within the school environment. So social workers sometimes feel inferior within their environment and cannot stand up and say their job requires that they do this and they will provide it as per social work mandate." (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

The above narratives reflect the unpleasant experiences that DSD social workers have as they service some schools. This suggests that their presence is unwanted and unappreciated in some schools (Teasley et al., 2012). These findings are shocking in the South African context, where any help toward supporting schools managing disruptive behaviours and developmental issues learners face should be appreciated.

Csók and Pusztai (2022) found that despite giving Hungarian teachers information about school social work, teachers still held certain attitudes towards these professionals and that acquiring their trust was time-consuming. Teachers were found to be distanced and sceptical of school social workers as their findings indicated that teachers did not perceive a need for the school social work services, or they may be unaware of the specifics of such services. If left unaddressed, these attitudes may lead to ineffective collaborations and hinder the successful integration of school social work services. CST is based on critiquing social structures that sustain marginalisation and inequalities for specific groups (Harvey, 2022).

The findings imply that school social workers are perceived as 'outsiders,' reflecting a persistent power dynamic within the educational environment that excludes them from being regarded as essential members of the professional community. The findings reveal that social workers experience a lack of recognition for their expertise in supporting the well-being of learners, and it may be argued that this lack of recognition leads to their professional roles and expertise being devalued by the teachers and school administrators.

7.2.6.3 Subtheme 6.3: Lack of practice demarcations at DSD

There seems to be a lack of practice demarcations at DSD which this subtheme outlines. Specifically, some of the participants expressed significant challenges about the confusion surrounding the practice demarcations of school social work, particularly regarding the expectations placed on them by other units and the Department of Social Development. This

confusion often results in school social workers being assigned responsibilities that fall outside their primary role. For instance, Grace (Supervisor, DSD) stated that they are frequently expected to take on tasks that belong to specialised units:

"You will find that there's a unit specialising in substance abuse, but we are still expected to do Ke Moja. There is a unit for HIV, but we are still also expected to do HIV awareness. In other regions, you find that they are not doing that... Somehow, we are doing a little of every unit given to us" (Grace, Supervisor, DSD).

"So we feel they want us to sponsor other units. If the challenges in one unit, then school social workers must then be a barricade to assist them, yet no one is assisting us in our unit." (Wendy, SSW, DSD)

In some instances, it was reported that when their colleagues in other units conduct assessments and discover a child in school, they may refer the case to the school social worker without considering whether the issue is relevant to the school context, Martha (SSW, DSD) stated, *"Most of our colleagues don't understand our roles... Then it also makes our caseload higher because the other part [colleagues] didn't do their work, but instead, they refer all cases that involve a child, if a child is at a school to the school base, even if it's not a school challenge."*

The narratives reflect that the DSD social workers were frustrated over being expected to handle cases and responsibilities that belonged to specialised units, such as HIV awareness and substance abuse, despite their primary focus being on school-related issues referred to them by the schools and districts. This is not standard practice as not all school social work regions across Gauteng are expected to do this. This affected the workload of school social workers and caused role conflict.

Because school social workers are expected to take on tasks without receiving enough support or recognition of their specialised role, the participants' narratives give the impression that the Department of Social Services does not have clear role demarcations for conducting school social work. Previous research (Drew & Gonzalez, 2021; Elswick & Cuellar, 2021; Heberle et al., 2021) draws similar conclusions indicating an insufficient understanding of school social workers' roles may lead to an absence of respect or recognition for their scope of practice and their professional boundaries. Therefore, DSD must provide clear demarcations of the role of school social workers to enhance professional practice.

7.2.7 Theme 7: Coordination and collaboration difficulties

Some participants described the challenges they experienced while attempting to form collaborative partnerships between the Departments of Social Development and the Department of Education and between school social workers, parents, and other professionals and experts. As such, the subthemes presented in this theme include: different understandings of high-risk schools between DSD and GDE, lack of support from the GDE for school social work practice, collaboration with other expert professionals, and lack of parental support and involvement as a challenge.

7.2.7.1 Subtheme 7.1: Different understandings of high-risk schools between DSD and GDE

This subtheme outlines that the significant challenges within the practice of school social work are further exacerbated by the lack of a clear and consistent definition of "high-risk" schools, which can lead to differences in the prioritisation and allocation of resources. Although services were provided across the province to schools needing them, the Department of Education had expected DSD school social workers to prioritise services for high-risk schools. As such, the GDE and the DSD have different understandings of what constitutes a "high-risk" school, with the GDE focusing on academic performance and the DSD focusing on social issues and challenges faced by learners. This lack of uniformity can hinder the effectiveness of school social work services in addressing the complex needs of learners in high-risk schools. The following extracts reflect this:

"We prioritise the high-risk schools. High-risk schools' definition, according to the Department of Education, will be schools that underperform academically. And then as social workers, when we talk about high-risk schools, we expect to discuss more social ills... Yeah, that's the way we always find ourselves having some difference there. To say if you're saying we should focus on the high-risk schools maybe, then you go to those schools you'll find that they don't have those learners they don't have the psychosocial issues it's all about performance, it's academic, at home they are fine. You find that out of a list of ten learners, you only have two. We've been battling with that to explain to them to say please if you say higher risk can we come up with a common understanding or common definition of what is a higher risk school." (Grace, Supervisor, DSD)

"Some regions are servicing schools that we classified as high risk, which High risk is not described in the same way by the Department of Education and Social Development. Social Development is about several social ills, yet education is about work performance."

So, we don't even have uniformity as to how we think to say this is how we want school social work to be done. Although there have been meetings, there have been no standardized every single thing.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

“We are social development and focus on social ills as social workers. The education department focuses on the pass rate of the schools. So if, most of the time, they see a particular school that did not do very well in terms of the pass rate, they regard it as high risk. Not necessarily because of ills that were reported within the schools. I think that comes second for the district. We are still trying to ensure that we speak one language if we speak of high-risk, low-risk schools.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

To identify high-risk schools according to an understanding of social ills and challenges, and based on the boundaries of school social work services, some participants reported that they engage in school profiling to identify the specific challenges faced by each school, as explained by Emelda:

“We do what we will call school profiling. Sometimes, they give us SBST members or LO teachers. The teacher will inform us, okay, the school has challenges of maybe teenage pregnancy or bullying, substance abuse. Then, after the school profiling, the official will come to the office to strategize how we will implement our intervention.” (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

The responses from the participants reflect the lack of standardised definition and outline of high-risk schools between the two departments, which may be argued to hamper the effectiveness of school social work services. As evidenced in the above findings, social workers are then requested to support schools that do not fall within the parameters of high risks in terms of psychosocial illness, and they may divert attention from schools in serious need of social services for their learners. Moreover, this definition discrepancy may lead to misaligned priorities and resource allocations for both departments, making it challenging to respond to the needs of the learners and schools effectively. A unified understanding of high-risk schools should be established to improve the situation and ensure alignment with social services (Lesesa, 2022), reflecting aspects of social ills needing school social work intervention and academic impact. School social workers should actively profile schools to ensure that social services are needed.

7.2.7.2 Subtheme 7.2: Lack of support from the Gauteng Department of Education for the school social work practice

The participants functioned in public schools, which are the basic education system that the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) supervises and regulates in the province of Gauteng. However, they reported that the Department was not providing them with the necessary support, as demonstrated in this subtheme. Specifically, some of the participants employed by DSD highlighted that the GDE did not provide sufficient resources and support to the practice of school social work, with most of the resources coming from the DSD, as noted in the below extracts:

“Most of the areas we were concerned about is about what the Department of Education is not bringing on board. We say if they could also assist in terms of resources from their own as the Department of Education because currently, everything and most of the manpower comes from social development resources... So if the Department of Education can also provide these resources” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“We’ve had engagement with people from education, especially around the issues of offices, issues of transport but so far we are not getting any positive feedback from them.... So generally, the Department of Education only gives 10%, and DSD only gives 90%.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

“In a case where there’s an emergency needing transport, GDE doesn’t assist. I’ve shouted, I’ve screamed.” (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD).

Another participant, Ayanda (Supervisor, DSD) reported that there was a lack of collaboration and togetherness between the two departments, with a sense of an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ mentality:

“And another thing, us being DSD and them being GDE, there’s always that to say, we are education, you are DSD. We have our ways of doing things. You cannot come to our space, even when they know that we have an MOU in place, but still, they don’t seem to understand that we are here for the learner's interest. We all see each other as them and us. If there were a togetherness between the two departments, we could solve issues.”

While Ursula (Supervisor, DSD), whose school social work services were provided from a GDE district, was of a similar view as stated, *“I feel that the regions where the social workers are not based in districts, it’s sort of, there isn’t, that the relationship with GDE is not as close. It’s still that us and them.”*, Nnaketsi (Supervisor, DSD) expressed that the support from GDE could be through the Department educating the school administrators and personnel about the agreement

for school social work services: *“If Department of Education can also provide these resources, I think, and fully educate their principles or people on the ground to say regarding school social work services, this is what is in place and can you all please adhere to it, I think, uh, that will be fine.”*

The reported responses from the participants regarding the lack of support from GDE reflect that GDE is not contributing resources (e.g., transport and human resources) to the practice of school social work provided by the DSD and that there were partnership issues between the two departments where ‘us and them’ and ‘they and them’ mentality existed. This mentality may be understood as GDE and DSD having separate and potentially conflicting realities about their understanding, roles and responsibilities in supporting school social work in the province.

Several factors may influence these realities, such as departmental cultures, professional identities and resource constraints experienced within each department. Moreover, the lack of support from GDE is evident regardless of the existence of the Framework for Developmental Social Welfare Services (2013, p.17), which states that the National Department of Basic Education should “commit resources to the delivery of social welfare services that seek to promote learners/students’ well-being in the different provinces; put mechanisms in place that acknowledges social service professionals/practitioners as crucial in learner support programmes.”

As such, considering that DSD is challenged with the lack of vehicles, resources such as transport in GDE or local schools that can be used to fetch school social workers from DSD regional offices could help strengthen school social work practice and promote learner wellbeing. This contextual situation exemplified critical social theory’s understanding of how systemic inequalities hinder effective service provision.

Moreover, Pretorius (2020) explains that the two departments signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in 2018 regarding school social work services, therefore supporting the participants’ reports calling for GDE to educate school administrators about the agreement and the specific mandate for the practice of school social work. Overall, both departments have responsibilities at play in the collaboration as per the MOU so that the social context of the learners improves and quality education is provided to them.

Lack of adherence to this collaboration understanding may result in social services practitioners and education practitioners not clearly understanding their roles and the goal of their services. It must also be noted that the MOU did not provide resources to support the functions of social

workers from DSD. The lack of collaboration and resource sharing between the departments in CST perpetuates power imbalances. It hinders the potential for transformative social change and more equitable and just education environments for all learners.

Moreover, GDE's reluctance to commit resources to DSD social workers who function within their territory, public schools, indicates power dynamics where GDE has more power and influence in schools. Therefore, the challenges social workers face may be averted if GDE intervenes. While the onus is to ensure that DSD social workers are provided with resources for this practice, challenges may exist within DSD, hindering them from doing so. GDE may have a role in supporting those social workers. As such, it may be argued that this lack of support and resources from GDE perpetuates the marginalisation of social workers and may be seen as a form of systematic oppression as school social work services are hampered and support for addressing complex learner needs is limited.

7.2.7.3 Subtheme 7.3: Collaboration with other expert professionals as a challenge

School social workers were reported to be faced with numerous challenges in their effective collaboration with other stakeholders and service providers to support learners by some participants, as apparent in this subtheme. One participant suggested that while collaboration exists, there is a lack of participation and engagement from other stakeholders, therefore forcing the school social workers to improvise and provide support outside their core expertise:

"Another barrier I would say is when collaborating with other stakeholders, that sometimes they just don't pitch and then you have to sort of improvise and provide whatever information that you can regarding that specific issue... such as issues related to crime." (Martha, SSW, DSD)

Other participants reflected on the lack of togetherness in the collaboration and working in silos when servicing the schools:

"We are still trying to work well with other professions. Because we are busy currently in the community, a huge challenge when it comes to working with other professions because we need their expertise, but we seem to be working in silos and everybody is doing their things." (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

"If ever we can work together with stakeholders because some you'd find there is some lack of participation of some sort. So it becomes a challenge, but if ever we can be on the

same path with them and know that at the end of the day, it's all about the interest of a child." (Naledi, Supervisor, DSD)

Another participant shared in-depth about collaboration between social workers supervisors at GDE and those from DSD:

"We're supposed to work together and whatever we do is supposed to be a collective effort but they seem to be bellowing instructions and I am yet to understand what exactly their role is. For example, when there is a learner incident, if there's psychosocial support that needs to be given to the school learners or whoever's affected by the incident, the team that usually accompanies the MEC will be the GDE social work supervisor that is responsible for that particular region or district, who will play the role of a liaison and will probably do some fact-finding, but they don't do any work. It's the social workers from DSD and the service delivery partners that do the social services intervention depending on the nature of the problem." (Nandi, Key Informant, DSD)

The above narratives from some participants indicate that while school social workers attempt to collaborate and form partnerships with other stakeholders, they are challenged. These challenges, as highlighted by the participants, include stakeholders not participating in agreed-upon partnerships, working in silos, and a general lack of participation. These suggest that the stakeholders may hold varying views on the purpose and objectives of collaboration, therefore indicating a lack of shared understanding and meaning through the lens of SCT.

Moreover, SCT denotes that language and communication play a crucial role in negotiating and establishing shared meaning, which some participants reflected may be lacking in the partnerships. This also indicates the failure to engage in social processes necessary to co-construct a shared reality of collaboration between the different partners. Nevertheless, the findings suggest a need for better collaboration and coordination among different professions and service providers, as the school social workers require the expertise of other stakeholders to support learners effectively. Balli (2016) supports these narratives, indicating the lack of collaboration between social workers and other specialists and suggesting that this may be due to their insufficient knowledge about school social work services in assisting with diverse educational activities, training, and socialisation of learners in extracurricular environments.

The purpose and vision of the collaboration must be clear as the lack of these can impede their ability to effectively and successfully support learners, and aligning all stakeholders towards

shared collaboration goals of serving the learners' best interests is crucial (Thi et al., 2022). The narratives from the participants may allude to aspects of systematic issues which CST as a theoretical framework may be used to comprehend. Specifically, these systematic issues may exist between the education department and social services systems due to unclear guidelines or protocols for collaboration, which was highlighted in Chapter Four as a shortfall of the memorandum of agreement between the GDE and DSD.

7.2.7.4 Subtheme 7.4: Lack of parental support and involvement as a challenge

In supporting learners with learning barriers or those with psychosocial challenges, school social workers required the parent's involvement which was often lacking as presented in subtheme. Some of the participants reported that another key challenge faced in the practice of school social work is the lack of support from parents. One participant's response highlighted the difficulties school social workers face in engaging with parents, particularly when the parents are intoxicated and end up swearing at the school social workers. The participant notes that even family members who want to help are afraid to get involved due to the mother's behaviour when intoxicated, as noted:

"In a previous case, it was difficult for me to get hold of the mother. Whenever I would trace the mother, I'd find her intoxicated and she would swear at me. I would then want to know if other family members are around to place the child. I found they were there; they wanted to help but were afraid of their mother. Because they know that if they take the child, the mother will come to them intoxicated and talk the way she wants to talk with them. So they are avoiding to be mixed in this." (Sarah, SSW, DSD)

Other participants echoed similar sentiments regarding the lack of parental involvement and engagement on issues that affect their children:

"... the support from the parents as well because most of the time the parents of the learners are not supportive. We're being rejected as we try to engage with them on the particular issues that they are faced by their children, and those issues will affect the learners at the school level. So, I think that the support from parents would make my job easier." (Enhle, SSW, DSD)

"The challenge with parents, is they don't want sometimes to sign consent forms, they don't want to engage, to be part and parcel of what is happening with their children and to take responsibility." (Thabile, Supervisor, DSD)

“There's also not always a lot of parental involvement. For some parents, it's a matter of sending their child to school, everything must happen there. Even if their child needs an intervention, the school must see to it. So getting parents involved is quite a challenge.”
(Faith, Key Informant, GDE)

The above narratives by some of the DSD social workers and a GDE key informant indicate that the parents of some children were not supportive and were less involved in the interventions provided by school social workers. In some instances, the school social workers were mistreated and rejected by the parents because of their involvement in the cases, and they did not want to give consent providing permission to school social workers to engage with the learners.

These findings are consistent with the conclusions by Pretorius and Herbst (2022) indicating that social workers were often exposed to client violence (e.g., a series of possible violent behaviours including physical abuse, emotional abuse (psychological or verbal), sexual abuse, or property damage against a social worker). This client's behaviour may be understood from various viewpoints within the context of school social work practice. For instance, South African communities have a deep history of violence, which continues to define the present and the future of the nation (Howell, 2019). This inherent history and culture of violence, as evidenced in the narratives from the participants, also manifests itself in the client-social work interactions.

The client's behaviours may also be seen as a result of the exposure to mind-altering substances, which Pretorius and Herbst (2022) argue may contribute to challenges with impulse control and the client's violent behaviours. While through literature, this behaviour may be understood, the researcher argues that it has implications for the practice of school social work because these encounters affect the psychological and emotional functioning of practitioners, compassion for their roles, and, to some degree, normalises the emotional and verbal abuse to social services professionals responding to child-protection cases in home environments.

Moreover, the responses from the participants suggest that parental involvement plays a critical role in the effectiveness of school social work practice and interventions. Without parental support, school social workers may face significant obstacles in addressing the complex needs of learners. The narratives are consistent with Kemp (2014), who states that school social workers are responsible for involving parents in activities involving their children.

As evidenced in the participants' narratives, this responsibility can be challenging, similar to Paul et al. (2021), who acknowledged parents' absence or lack of support in activities such as discussing

the learners’ progress. It may be argued that the lack of support and involvement from parents may be due to various factors such as personal social problems (e.g., alcohol addiction and poverty), life demands (e.g., burdened by low-income, inflexible work hours, multiple employments), and negative experiences with school administrators (Sunbal & Jabeen, 2021).

The narratives from the participants about their experiences and perceptions of parental support and involvement may be analysed using the SCT and CST. SCT may be used to understand the parents’ mistreatment and rejection of social services support as their knowledge and realities are constructed through social interactions. For instance, their reactions to social workers may be shaped by historical violence, substance abuse, direct and indirect negative experiences with social services institutions and professionals or even the ideas that ‘outsiders’ should not be involved in their family's matters.

CST complements SCT as power dynamics may exist between the social workers and the parents. Specifically, the parents may be mistreating social workers and not actively supporting their interventions due to societal power imbalances where the parents from marginalised communities (i.e., suffering from systematic oppression, poverty, and lack of resources) may feel disempowered and verbally and physically abusive towards those they perceive as representing the state.

The subsequent section presents findings and discussions for data on school social workers’ current and perceived education and training requirements.

7.3 FINDINGS ON PERCIEVED EDUCATION AND TRAINING REQUIREMENTS OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

The findings are organised according to two themes, as outlined in Table 6: i) Exposure to training and professional development opportunities, and ii) perceived education, training, and experience needs for school social workers. Each theme has sub-themes.

Table 6 Themes and subthemes related to education and training of school social workers

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Exposure to training and professional development opportunities	Subtheme 1.1: Trauma debriefing training to support school social work practice

	Subtheme 1.2: LGBTQI+ training to support school social work practice Subtheme 1.3: Child protection services training to support school social work practice Subtheme 1.4: Completion of the accredited school social work training
Theme 2: Perceived education, training, and experience needs for school social workers	Subtheme 2.1: A need for continuous training to capacitate school social workers Subtheme 2.2: Mental health support training for school social workers Subtheme 2.3: The need for specialized training before being placed in school social work Subtheme 2.4: The need for practice experience in other fields before being placed in school social work

7.3.1 Theme 1: Exposure to training and professional development opportunities

In this study, participants reflected on training and professional development opportunities that they have been exposed to in their school social work practice. These opportunities are presented in the subthemes, including trauma debriefing training to support school social work practice, LGBTQI+ training to support school social work practice, child protection services training to support school social work practice, and completion of the accredited school social work training.

7.3.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Trauma debriefing training to support school social work practice

This subtheme outlines exposure to training on trauma debriefing that some participants received. Considering that school social workers often encountered issues related to suicide during their school social work practice, some participants reported that they attended related to trauma debriefing. This was evident in the following extracts:

“School social workers are trained on short courses like trauma debriefing. Normally, they say we need social workers strictly because they are currently in the field. Although they will also invite colleagues from other units to come and participate, school social workers are the priority for everyone who joins the program because we always have to rush to schools to do trauma briefing.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“It is only those short courses. We also have short courses by NPOs where they will be doing refresher courses on trauma debriefing... and those specific programs that they will normally invite NPOs that specialise in them to come and do short or training for about two days or a week.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

Overall, the DSD social workers’ responses indicate that they have been exposed to trauma debriefing training through DSD and local NPOs. As suggested in the responses, these training sessions are significant to school social work as they may help practitioners recognise and respond to traumatic experiences and reactions in the school setting with learners and school staff (Watson et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2024). Cole et al. (2013) and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee (NCTSN) (2017) further support the call for trauma debriefing training for school practitioners, such as school social workers, as they put forth that practitioners should be aware of the impact of trauma on the academic experiences and successes of learners, therefore ensuring effective service provision.

7.3.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: LGBTQIA+ training to support school social work practice

The importance of inclusivity and understanding ways to support learners from vulnerable groups, particularly LGBTQIA+ learners was reflected by the participants as outlined in this subtheme. Two participants reported attending training on working with LGBTQIA+ learners in schools. They reported on the significance of the training noting that as a result of the training, they got to understand how they can effectively support learners who may identify as LGBTQIA+:

“I recently attended the LGBTQ plus training, in which I got to understand, when you come to that particular client, how to support them. In the training, we were trained to remain professional at all times and not to be judgmental... So it is empowering as we attend this training to be diverse in addressing any client.” (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

“Another one that I attended was, I think, gender equality. How do we go about cases related to gender equality in terms of LGBTQI cases? So it was the first time I attended training like that. It was helpful because sometimes you get cases like that, and then you

may forget about some of the things you must say and some of the things you must not say. So it was really helpful for me.” (Uthando, SSW, DSD)

The above narratives from DSD social workers reflect that training related to supporting LGBTQIA+ learners was aimed at helping the participants better understand the LGBTQIA+ community and how they can provide effective support and services. The training urged the participants to promote non-judgmental attitudes and professionalism in their practice. It cautioned them about the use of language when engaging with learners who may identify as LGBTQIA+. The training content is consistent with findings from Curtis (2006), who explained that vulnerable children wanted social workers to learn how to deal with young people, be respectful and willing to listen and be empathetic.

The LGBTQIA+ training can be viewed through the CST lens as a critical essential step towards challenging structural and societal norms that lead to the oppression and marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ learners. It may be argued that due to the training, school social workers may be conscientious that learners hold diverse sexual identities. With this understanding, school social workers may adapt their practice to accommodate and respond to these diverse sexual identities.

The training serves as an emancipatory practice which would empower the social workers to adopt non-judgemental attitudes and become more empathetic and inclusive when providing services to LGBTQIA+ learners, ultimately contributing to the transformation of education environments to be more inclusive spaces where all learners, regardless of their gender and sexual orientation identities are supported, valued and cared for. Moreover, the training is pertinent in the context of South Africa, where LGBTQIA+ learners are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, bullying, and so on (Langa, 2015; Msibi, 2012).

7.3.1.3 Subtheme 1.3: Child protection services training to support school social work practice

As outlined in previous themes, the role of school social workers is pivotal, particularly when addressing issues related to the abuse and safety of children. As such, this subtheme outlines the training specifically focused on child protection and statutory cases that school social workers had been exposed to. This training was reported to be helpful to school social workers in terms of assisting them in understanding processes related to statutory cases, removing children due to safety concerns, and also understanding the Children’s Act:

“Whenever our statutory unit within DSD has training, we have requested for them to include our school social workers so they can be exposed and know exactly what is expected if one has to undertake statutory cases.”

“There’s a training that we were doing. It’s a safety and risk assessment about assessing risk rather than removing a child. You must assess whether the risk is low, high, or medium. Yeah, that also assists social workers.” (Emelda, Supervisor, DSD)

“We also attended the Children’s Act training because of the Children’s Act book. It was challenging for us to understand how to put sections. Through the training that we received, it has become a little bit easier to understand it.” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“The Department of Social Development does a lot when it comes to any changes in child protection and child justice legislation. They would invite us, and we’re part of some of their training forums.” (Faith, Key Informant, GDE)

The narratives from the DSD social workers and GDE key informant report that social workers were exposed to training opportunities related to child protection cases, and the purpose of the opportunities was to clarify what is expected from the practitioners when dealing with statutory cases, the process of removing a child, and also how to understand sections in the Children’s Act. Training on child protection is essential as the Constitution and the Children’s Act state that all children should be protected from any form of abuse. It is the responsibility of school social workers to ensure protection in cases where children are suspected of experiencing abuse. Therefore, practitioners need to understand the processes of this responsibility (Reyneke, 2020)

7.3.1.4 Subtheme 1.4: Completion of the accredited school social work training

Most participants reported receiving and completing school social work accredited training/ courses provided by qualified social workers and by the University of the Witwatersrand and school social work workshops, as apparent in this subtheme. In their responses, participants from DSD recognised the priority that school social workers in the School Social Work programme have received from their department, by capacitating them with a short course specifically focused on school social work practice. They acknowledged that the short course training was exclusive to social workers in their programme and funded by DSD:

“Many of them have been trained in Wits course since 2017. So the social workers in the school social work program prioritise the training, including their supervisor and the manager who's responsible.” (Nandi, Key Informant, DSD)

“The short course from Wits on school social work is quite helpful and empowers the school social workers a lot regarding working with children. The department has put in effort to ensure that they empower the school social workers.” (Thabile, Supervisor, DSD)

“The school social workers attend every week and are taught by professors, doctors, and other academics who train them during the course. I also attended the course myself in 2022 and completed it. The province went out of its way to ensure that we attend that course, and it's quite expensive.” (Ursula, Supervisor, DSD)

“The Department of Social Development in Gauteng has partnered with Wits University to ensure every social worker does a short course in school social work. All school social workers are encouraged to participate, and the department pays it.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“As the school social work program is new, the department needed to ensure that the social workers were equipped with knowledge. I've participated in the Wits training program, which is very good... It was very beneficial.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

Although the participants did not delve deeply into the specific content that they learned during the short course training, they summarised some of the aspects of school social work covered:

“We get trained in terms of how to provide school social work services and focuses on what our roles is. At the end, you'd get a certificate for completion” (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

“The course entails the whole scope of social work issues in schools, like the problems that we come across and how we support a client. The Wits training is extensive; it covers almost everything.” (Naledi, Supervisor, DSD)

“It's very informative. We get diverse information, not only based on the statutory services but also linked to different kinds of services that social workers experience because the school is its environment, with all diverse challenges that some social workers have never dealt with, like mental health.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“We do assessments that require referencing and all that. It’s very intensive.... So, it describes education systems and how we can apply social work in schools. I think that is guiding our practice as social workers. In my office, 5 of 6 social workers have been trained and found to be competent. I think that it is NQF level 5.” (Wendy, Supervisor, DSD)

Enhle (SSW, DSD), who had not yet attended the short course since they joined the School Social Work programme, noted that their colleagues who are registered for the short course shared the information they learned with them:

“They would take several social workers per their term. I’ve been working as a school social worker since 2015 but have not attended the course yet. But I do think that I will get that opportunity.... Colleagues share with me, particularly about the school social work program they have been involved in. And there will be specifications like what you should do or your roles as a school social worker, and where you end with your interventions?”

Other participants employed by SGB reported that they, too, had received training on school social work, and we provided them with a certificate at the end of the accredited training:

“Last year, Vergottini from Northwest University was also a qualified social worker and lecturer. She is now presenting the school social work tools for different regions; I also attended that. I received a certificate, and the council accredits it.” (Tamia, SSW, SGB)

"I've attended a course by Marelize Vergottini. It was the toolbox for school social workers, focusing on our mandate, our roles in school, how we can safely implement therapy, and the permission of and the reporting of just all the guidelines for school social workers." (Natash, SSW, SGB)

The above narratives from the different participants indicate that social workers employed by the DSD and SGB had completed training related to school social work to support their roles. Specifically, the school social workers under DSD can attend a short course module on school social work practice. This is consistent with the outline from NACOSSWEP (2018), highlighting that the University of the Witwatersrand received approval from SACSSP to run the accredited short course. The SGB-employed social workers attended a school social work training workshop. At the end of the course and training workshop, they would receive a competence certificate for their attendance.

The exposure to training in specialisation fields is common within the profession of social work to capacitate the practitioners. For instance, another government department, the Western Cape Department of Education, trained its school social workers on inclusive education (Vergottini, 2019). Overall, the examples of the content covered in the training include a focus on the roles of school social workers, statutory services, and mental health.

The narratives are supported by Constable et al. (2006), who put forth that school social work training should include content that adequately prepares practitioners to help children cope, manage their challenges, and contribute to their positive school experiences. The narratives are further supported by the Michigan Department of Education (2019), which states that any training program related to school social work should be comprehensive enough to cover multiple interdependent components that prepare practitioners for certification to demonstrate proficiencies.

7.3.2 Theme 2: Perceived education, training, and experience needs for school social workers

Regarding education, training, and field experience, the participants had varying perceptions and experiences, which are presented under this theme and subthemes. Specifically, subthemes reported on in this theme include a need for continuous training to capacitate school social workers, mental health support training for school social workers, the need for specialised training before being placed in school social work, and the need for practice experience in other fields before being placed in school social work.

7.3.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: A need for continuous training to capacitate school social workers

This subtheme highlights the need for continuous training to capacitate school social workers in the Gauteng Province. As such, the responses from the participants indicate strong consensus on the need for continuous training and professional development opportunities for school social workers to enhance their skills and effectiveness in addressing the evolving challenges faced by learners in schools:

“We need refresher courses because we are dealing with continuously changing issues. Whatever issues we had about five years back are no longer relevant now. We have new issues. We have cyberbullying that we didn’t have previously. We have a lot of learners committing suicide, which was not there previously. So you need to keep up with the times.

We need to refresh our courses to keep up with the social issues. Because we didn't have Nyaope as a substance abuse issue previously, nor did we have ukuthwasa or maybe harmful religious practices in schools.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“Now and then, we need training to better ourselves to offer better services to learners in school... Although we attended the Wits training. Maybe once in a while, another training needs to be given to us because information and knowledge constantly change... So that we can be in line with what is happening around the world ” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“So there is a need for more orientation and training because dealing with a school as in one school is a lot on its own. Remember, the learners are from different families; they differ even if they are from one family. And there are so many complex dynamics there. There are so many issues with the culture and spiritual calling. So I think it's very important.” Naledi, Supervisor, DSD)

Overall, the participants' responses, specifically the DSD social workers, suggest the need for continuous training opportunities or 'refresher courses' to address constantly changing issues such as cyberbullying, suicide, drugs and substance use, and evolving cultural and spiritual issues among learners. As such, continuous training would capacitate school social workers to understand better approaches to support learners in their context and their forever-changing challenges.

Nadler and Nadler (1989) support the narratives as they note that employers should ensure that practitioners are trained to improve their skills, knowledge, and attitudes within their practice context. Social constructionism theories posit that knowledge is continually reconstructed through social interactions and processes (Hoffman, 1991). This section's context aligns with the findings, emphasising the need to address new and emerging social issues through continuous training. It may be argued that continuous training spaces are social sites in which school social workers reconstruct their knowledge about social issues and actively reflect on their roles within these issues,

7.3.2.2 Subtheme 2.2: Mental health support training for school social workers

Considering that the participants reported that mental health challenges amongst learners were prevalent in the public schools, this theme outlines the need for mental health training to support those affected learners. The majority of the participants reported on the unanimous need for enhanced training in mental health to help children facing mental health challenges. This training

was expressed as the participants felt a sense of vulnerability when dealing with learners experiencing mental health issues, particularly suicide:

“I think if maybe the Department of Social Development can send us to training that that in line with mental health so that we can know what to say and what not to say, for example, if a child is suicidal. If you’re not well trained, you might end up saying things that might also push the child to suicide.” (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

“The only way the social worker can be equipped is by providing training on how to deal with mental health issues because we were never equipped with dealing with issues of mental health... Severe depression is sometimes difficult for the social worker to identify or identify that a kid needs more psychological help.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“Mental health is not an easy one to deal with, and we don’t have specific mental health training. I think maybe they do give us basic training for us to be able to understand when we do our assessment that this is a mental issue and how to intervene and assist.” (Sarah, SSW, DSD)

“More training would assist us in addressing mental health matters because such matters are sensitive.” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“Continuously if we could be informed on how mental health is evolving and the new terms and all of those concepts that could equip us to be able to assist learners with mental health issues.” (Martha, SSW, DSD)

“Social workers need more training in mental health, especially in Gauteng, where mental health challenges among learners are prevalent, including suicide attempts. School social workers spend considerable time addressing these issues, and empowering them through mental health training programs is essential.” (Thabile, Supervisor, DSD),

The above narratives from some of the participants reflect a critical need for enhanced training in mental health for school social workers to better support learners facing mental health issues such as depression and suicidal thoughts. Moreover, it is evident from the narratives that the participants felt that they lacked the necessary skills to identify, recognise, and intervene in mental health issues effectively. Without proper training, practitioners may adversely exacerbate a learner’s distress and may struggle with sensitively responding to matters related to mental health.

Therefore, the consensus amongst the participants is that targeted training is essential for improving school social workers' ability to assist vulnerable learners. This training is important as school social workers should be competent on interventional strategies to identify and address the mental health concerns of learners (Fensterstock et al., 2025).

7.3.2.3 Subtheme 2.3: The need for specialised training before being placed in school social work

Exposure to school social work training before placement in school social work positions was highlighted as a need, as apparent in this subtheme. Regarding participants' perceptions about training and experience requirements for school social work posts, there was a consensus among the majority of them regarding the necessity of specialised training for social workers before their deployment in school settings. In their responses, the participants collectively highlighted the critical need for comprehensive training and preparation for social workers entering school environments, underscoring the complexity of the role that practitioners have in the school setting:

"Before a person can be placed in school, they must attend training first. Regarding this, we were hired when we didn't know anything about school social work, in the sense that we depended mainly on those who've been working there and had more work experience. So, immediately when they hire you, they say you will be a school social worker, and you are supposed to go to training first...." (Eleanor, SSW, DSD)

"School social work is a specialised field, so I think for somebody to start working, it won't be good enough for me to say the social worker must have a four-year degree in social work. There should be some intensive training. Hence, in Region E, when school social workers were employed, they were taken to Wits University and other training for the first four months to capacitate them to work with the learner."* (Thabile, Supervisor, DSD)

"I think there is a need for specialised education or training before someone is deployed in schools as a social worker. You need to learn more about the environment and the school itself. So whatever training program you do should be relevant to the school." (Khethani, SSW, DSD)

On the contrary, one participant was of the view that the four-year undergraduate degree was sufficient for the practice of school social work, as reported, *"I feel the education or the training*

that is provided in our degree is effective to be able to provide services as a school social worker.”
(Martha, SSW, DSD)

The above narratives from the DSD social workers suggest that specialised education and training in school social work should be required for school social work posts or jobs. This specialised education and training would add to the four-year social work degree. Specifically, the participants expressed that before being placed in schools, practitioners should attend training to gain knowledge on the field and better understand the school environment.

This is consistent with Peckover et al.’s (2012) study conducted in Iowa, which found that school social workers often felt incompetent in performing their responsibilities and needed training. Other studies (e.g., Berzin & O’Conner, 2010) further support the narrative as it has been argued that specialised training would provide school social workers with practice licenses through a formal certificate or a master’s programme qualification. Only one participant believed that the four-year social work degree was sufficient. Considering that the Council for Higher Education states that the qualification should be broad, flexible, and responsive to different contexts, Svensson et al. (2022) put forth that social workers are exposed to children and child protection elements over their four-year degrees. However, there isn’t a specific single module on child protection, but it is lumped with vulnerable groups modules.

7.3.2.4 Subtheme 2.4: The need for practice experience in other fields before being placed in school social work

Exposure to other social work fields before placement in school social work positions was highlighted as a need, as apparent in this subtheme. Specifically, some participants felt that training and education were unimportant in deploying school social workers in schools or school social work programmes. Instead, their responses indicated that prior experience in various social work fields is essential for successfully navigating the complexities of the school environment:

“School is a different environment, and it needs someone already familiar with different cases that they will have to deal with and have experience with. School social work is always referred to as a specialised service. It’s intensive work, and I feel like a new social worker shouldn’t be placed in school social work. So I feel like you have to have an experience as a social worker first.” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

“I think there’s a need for experience... If somebody comes from university, I think it’s become a challenge because we are running, mainly because we are not placed in schools.

It would be nice for someone to have experience before she can come and join the school social work... Working hand in hand with other professionals such as teachers can be challenging as they sometimes question your expertise in the field, but if you have your degree and a little bit of experience, you'll be fine. ” (Nnaketsi, Supervisor, DSD)

“I'm not in favour of new social workers being put into schools. I think that would be throwing them literally in the lion's den. We should not have new, newly qualified, or even inexperienced social workers that get put in school... At least three to five years' experience as a social worker.” (Nandi, Key Informant, DSD)

Some participants suggested that beginning a career in statutory social work could provide valuable foundational knowledge. Their views emphasise the importance of understanding the legal and procedural aspects of social work, which can significantly enhance a school social worker's ability to handle complex cases in a school environment, as reported in the following extracts:

“Before social workers can be placed in schools, they should start with statutory work to become familiar with social work. On my side, I started as a school social worker, and a part of me feels like I wish I had started in statutory because I would have gained some insight and more information on how to deal with some of the cases I receive in the school. ” (Martha, SSW, DSD)

“I think that in school social work, we need social workers that have experience, at least one or two years' experience, before they can come to school social work to say they understand if we speak of statutory requirements, if one needs to remove a child, they understand, and they can only get that from the statutory unit.” (Ayanda, Supervisor, DSD)

Other participants suggested that newly qualified social workers were overwhelmed with their experience of school social work practice:

“You can't just take a new social worker straight from school and expect them to deliver. It is a recipe for disaster because they get eaten up alive in the school environment. They don't know whether they're sinking or drowning, many of them drown” (Nandi, Key Informant, DSD)

“The majority of the social workers who come directly from outside when they’re hired and put in the schools, they are more overwhelmed than the social workers who first started in fieldwork, then worked their way up, and then moved to school....” (Linda, Supervisor, DSD)

Ayanda (Supervisor, DSD) suggested that experience is critical in equipping social workers with the confidence and knowledge needed to handle complex cases, particularly those involving removing children from their homes. Therefore, there was a need for social workers to have prior experience before being placed in school social work, as reported:

“Within school psychosocial support, you find that the school social workers, even when you provide support in terms of supervisory, will be reluctant to act on those, especially with removal cases because, one, they don’t understand, and two, they are just scared, the fear of the unknown. And if they had started from a statutory unit, they would understand and have the necessary background.”

The above quotations from some participants underscore shared views on the necessity for experienced social workers in school social work for job posts. As such, participants expressed that new graduates often struggled with effectively collaborating and may lack the practical experience needed to navigate the complexities of school social work, such as the overwhelming nature of statutory cases and difficult collaborative partnerships.

Regarding statutory work, some participants advocated for a structured pathway in which practitioners gain foundational experience in statutory work before transitioning to school social work practice. The foundational experience would equip practitioners with the necessary background to handle sensitive cases such as child removal and statutory requirements for such cases. The quotations further suggest that school social workers may be reluctant to remove children who are suspected of experiencing abuse as they don’t understand the processes or are fearful of removing children.

These perspectives from the participants align with broader discussions, reflecting that practitioners are not adequately prepared to deal with statutory cases linked to child protection in their undergraduate programmes (Svensson et al., 2022). Vergottini (2019, p.321) supports the participants’ narrative as they recommend that school social workers should have at least 5 years of experience as a social worker before being appointed as school social workers and that “the quality and nature of the experience of a prospective social worker should also be a consideration.”

7.4 CONCLUSION

The objective of this chapter was to provide a comprehensive presentation of the findings related to the contextual factors that influence the practice of school social work in the province. The responses of the participants provided in-depth information about the context of school social work and revealed that support received from the managers, colleagues at DSD and schools, access to technological tools and having offices at the district level contributed to the effectiveness of the practice of school social work.

The social services support requests and referrals from learners and schools validated the need for school social work services. Numerous contextual factors have affected school social work which are mostly related to administration and staffing issues at DSD, structural and logistic issues at schools for school social work services, and unclear role demarcations which created confusion about the functions of school social workers in the practice of school social work, and issues related to coordination of collaboration partnerships with school, between DSD and GDE, community organisations and stakeholders, and with parents.

Overall, the chapter found that while the practice is currently evident in Gauteng Province schools, there were contextual issues that affected the effectiveness of service provision and the practice of school social work. Current training and perceived training requirements were also explored, revealing that schools the social workers have been exposed to various training opportunities and that there was a need for continuous capacitation to stay up-to-date with current issues and new practice methods. In the next chapter, the researcher presents major conclusions from the data presented in Chapter Six and the current chapter and recommendations for the practice of school social work and future research in this specific field.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SYNTHESIS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding chapters, the findings and analysis of the data were reported. In this chapter, the researcher presents the major findings and conclusions, recommendations arising from the findings and implications for future research. The study was located in the emerging practice field of school social work and set out to investigate the current state of the practice.

Specifically, the purpose was to explore practice experiences, barriers that act as barriers and facilitators to practice and education and training requirements within the practice of school social work in the Gauteng province. A comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding was obtained from 10 school social workers providing school social work services, 10 supervisors and two key informants who were managers for school social work services in the province.

The study was set in two frameworks, the Social Constructionism Theory (SCT) and Critical Social Theory (CST). The SCT as a framework approach helped understand that practice experiences of individuals are socially situated, knowledge is constructed through interaction with others, and language and culture are crucial lenses through which practitioners experience, communicate, and comprehend reality.

CST helped understand the world through individuals' viewpoints and how these viewpoints fostered meaningful social action. An exploratory qualitative research design was employed to guide the research methods. The triangulated participants' responses were analysed using thematic analysis, and emerging themes concerning the study objectives were discussed. The findings were further triangulated with the conducted document review and existing literature. This chapter first outlines the major findings and their significance and conclusions, then the recommendations for the practice of school social work. Lastly, the researcher outlines the implications for future research.

8.2 MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The most important findings of the research are summarised in line with the first three objectives established at the beginning of the study to serve as a guide for the research, as well as the themes that were separated and presented in Chapters Six and Seven.

8.2.1 The practice experiences of school social workers in the Gauteng Province

While the literature on the practice of school social work in schools has been extensively written about in high-income countries, a notable gap has been identified through an independent scoping review focusing on the roles and responsibilities of social workers within the South African context. In Chapter Two, the researcher acknowledged the South African literature on this topic and noted that most studies with social workers as participants have been conducted outside the Gauteng Province, while others have examined the need for social work services in schools from the perceptions of non-social work participants such as teachers, school administrators, learners and educational and provincial district staff members.

To address this gap in the literature, this study offers context-specific, empirical grounded analysis of the roles and responsibilities of social workers in the practice of school social work based on collected data directly from practitioners employed by specific schools and those employed within the School Social Work programme in DSD, and key informants involved in school social work services at GDE and DSD. This study is the first in-depth exploration of the practice of school social work within the Gauteng Province involving these groups of participants. Furthermore, the scarcity of literature on the topic was confirmed by the researcher and the supervisors in an independent scoping review titled '*The Roles and Responsibilities of School Social Workers in the African Context: A Scoping Review.*'

As such, by systematically documenting the roles and responsibilities of social workers in the practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province, this study not only fills critical gaps in the literature on the topic in South Africa, a low-middle-income country but also introduces original new insights of their roles at micro-level, mezzo-level and macro-level with school awareness campaigns. The findings make significant contributions that can be used to inform policy on support services for learners, standardising the roles of social workers and developing practice guidelines, which are presented later in this chapter.

The subsequent sections summarise the findings on social workers' experiences regarding their roles and responsibilities and draw key conclusions.

8.2.1.1 Micro-level intervention in the practice of school social work

The findings of the study confirmed the multifaceted roles and services school social workers provide to learners and their families. Intervention and services at the micro level included the following:

- Fostering supportive learning environments that address the diverse problems of learners, therefore contributing to teaching and their academic success. They do so by identifying and responding to psychosocial issues faced by the learners.
- Actively working to advocate against abuse at school (e.g., corporal punishment) and abuse at home (e.g., neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse). They do so by involving police services, removing the child if necessary or when family preservation services have failed. Removed children are placed in temporary homes.
- Conducting interviews and assessments with learners whom the teachers have identified to be having problems and needing social work services.
- Learners received counselling to explore their problems (i.e., what the problem is, the child's support system, and who is in the child's family system). Trauma counselling/debriefing was also provided. Sometimes, young school social workers struggled with debriefing families and requested the assistance of older school social workers.
- Conducting home visits to assess the learners' home environments and engage directly with the parents/ family/ caregivers, when learner problems were identified by the teachers or after the social work interview with the learners. Pertinent issues needing home visits included, for example, lack of resources, issues around school uniforms, learner absenteeism, poverty and social grant misuse.
- Initiating or participating in parenting programmes/ meetings at schools raised awareness about learners' mental health issues, and their family intervention services provided parental skills training.

Conclusions: The findings underscore the dynamic roles that school social workers take when providing individualised support for the learners and their families. They identify and respond to the wide range of psychosocial challenges affecting learners' academic and personal development by conducting assessments and counselling. They also conduct home visits to assess the learners' home circumstances that may be contributing to their challenges and engage with parents. Home contextual issues such as lack of resources, school uniforms, absenteeism, poverty and social grant misuse are some problems that school social work services address.

The intervention and services contribute to supportive education environments, therefore, improving learners' wellbeing and strengthening family functioning. Findings further show that while the DSD and GDE had specific employments for school social workers to provide school social work services, the GDE had social work supervisors directly providing services such as assessments, counselling and trauma support as there were no specific school social workers in their department. This suggests a need to clarify their employment as supervisors and their specific roles by the GDE.

8.2.1.2 Mezzo-level intervention in the practice of school social work

This study revealed school social workers' multifaceted roles and services provided to learners and teachers in group settings. Intervention and services at the mezzo level included the following:

- Designing, implementing and/or participating in school awareness campaigns centred on child protection, violence, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, sexual reproductive health and children's rights and responsibilities.
- Designing and implementing group work interventions based on the needs assessment that was conducted helps explore and identify school problems that need to be addressed in group settings. Groups varied and included groups for pregnant teenagers, learners with substance issues, and victims and perpetrators of bullying.
- Training teachers to recognise and identify learners with psychosocial problems, ways to effectively and immediately respond to these challenges and appropriate referral

Conclusion: The findings reflect the important responsibilities of school social workers in providing services and intervention at the group level in schools. School social work services address a wide range of psychosocial issues affecting learners, such as awareness campaigns on child protection, facilitating group work sessions on violence and substance abuse, and training teachers to recognise and address psychosocial issues. These services and interventions encourage positive school climates, improving the learners' well-being and academic outcomes.

8.2.1.3 Collaborations with other stakeholders to ensure holistic intervention

This study's finding confirmed that social workers actively promote and participate in interdisciplinary and inter-organisational collaboration when supporting learners and schools. Their roles in collaborative partnerships are captured in the summaries below:

- There is a shortage of school social workers in the province's public schools, therefore collaboration was found to be significant in supporting schools and learners. Collaboration with different stakeholders was through brainstorming and planning services/interventions needed for specific schools. In some instances, collaboration was evident in local forum discussions and meetings with different stakeholders in education districts.
- Collaboration existed through an MOU between the DSD and GDE, allowing school social workers from the DSD to provide school social work services to the GDE schools.
- They collaborated with SAPS, Teddy Bear Clinic and the DSD Child Protection Unit for cases such as learner sexual abuse and child trafficking. The collaboration was through getting SAPS officers to accompany the school social workers when needing to remove a child from the home environment and attending to sexual abuse cases. Learners who needed specialised support services or further intervention after sexual abuse encounters were referred to the Teddy Bear and DSD Children Protection Unit. School campaigns on child/ human trafficking were conducted in partnership with SAPS.
- They collaborated with the DSD Sustainable Livelihoods Unit in cases where learners were identified as needing school uniforms, affected by household lack of food, or affected by family emergencies such as house fires. The collaboration was through school social workers referring the affected learners and their families to this specific unit.
- They collaborated with various departments and external NPOs/ NGOs (e.g., DSD Substance Abuse Unit, Westview Clinic Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation) to address substance use issues identified among learners. These organisations would assist with referral cases needing specialised substance use rehabilitation or support services.
- They collaborated with the Department of Health to address issues such as teenage pregnancy or challenges related to sexual and reproductive health. School campaigns related to this were conducted in partnership with nurses from the Department of Health.
- They collaborated with the Department of Health and mental health advocacy organisations such as SADAG and Lifeline to address the mental health issues of learners. The collaboration was due school to social workers not being experts on mental health and issues of suicide and that their role was to link learners with services provided by the organisations.
- They collaborated with community-based organisations such as FAMSA, which specialise in relationship counselling and helping families with functioning and parental skills support. This collaboration was achieved through the school social workers referring to such organisations.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the crucial role of school social workers in fostering interdisciplinary and inter-organisational collaboration. The MOU agreement between the GDE and DSD is significant in ensuring that school social work services are provided to learners and schools as there is a shortage of school social workers within the GDE.

The significant partnerships, formed to effectively address complex issues such as child abuse, substance abuse, mental health, and poverty, were reported to stakeholders such as FAMSA and other external NPOs/ NGOs, SAPS, DSD Sustainable Livelihood Unit, Child Protection Unit and Teddy Bear Clinic. As a result, the learners' general well-being is holistically supported, and the partnerships assist in creating support networks even for the families and their contextual challenges. The partnership also contributes to creating safer and inclusive school environments.

8.2.2 Contextual factors that act as facilitators and barriers to the practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province

The literature presented in Chapter Two and findings presented in Chapter Six demonstrated that the practice of school social work has a crucial role in enhancing learners' psychosocial and academic functioning, and contributes to a positive and supportive school climate. Chapter Two also highlighted significant, context-specific challenges faced by social workers in the practice of school social work around the world. As highlighted in the literature presented, while some of these challenges align with global trends, their manifestations differ across different contexts. In some contexts and schools, the practice of school social work was embraced, while in others, it is less recognised and underutilised.

Moreover, while existing research in the South African context, mostly from Western Cape and Free State provinces, has explored barriers to school social work, the findings presented in this study uniquely contextualised these barriers within Gauteng province. Regarding facilitators to the practice of school social work, it is notable that this study is the first in the South African context to systematically investigate and report the factors that support the practice of school social work, focusing on the perceptions of social workers providing services to schools and learners.

Unlike previous research which has primarily focused on the challenges to the practice of school social work, this study also explored and acknowledged the positive experiences social workers have had in education systems during their engagement with schools, learners and parents. These facilitators include having designated provincial coordinators for school social work programmes,

collegial support, access to technological communication resources, DSD social workers being placed in GDE districts, schools and learners willing to receive school social work services, and access to supervisors for DSD social workers.

Regarding the barriers to the practice of school social work, this study highlights the persistence of structural and systemic challenges, such as high caseloads, lack of human resources, lack of transport to schools for social workers placed at district and regional offices, non-functioning SBST, teachers' reluctance with completing reporting forms, lack of space in schools for social work services, lack of understanding and confusion about the role of the social workers, social workers perceived as outsiders, lack of practice demarcation, issues with collaboration, etc. These challenges all have negative consequences for the practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province.

As such, findings contribute to knowledge by identifying professional and systemic factors that either support or hinder the practice of school social work in the Gauteng province. Additionally, a document review, presented in Chapter Five, was conducted to analyse relevant legislation and education policies. An MOU document was created that informs and signifies school social work practice in the Gauteng province.

The contribution of this review to the study is that it provides original insights by demonstrating how the lack of specificity regarding the social workers' roles in the education policy documents weakens the institutionalisation of school social work, making it difficult to advocate for standardised professional expectations. Furthermore, the MOU reviewed lacked a detailed description of the roles of social workers in the various programmes they facilitate in schools and with school-going children.

Subsequent sections summarise the findings on facilitators and barriers to school social work practice in the Gauteng province and draw key conclusions.

8.2.2.1 Support and resources received by school social workers

The study revealed that various support structures and resources were provided to school social workers to ensure their effective practice in school settings:

- The provincial coordinators actively support social work supervisors. The coordinators were found to advocate for school social work services at a provincial level. This was not

an easy task as findings suggest that structural and systematic structures impose limitations on their role.

- Social workers placed at the GDE district level were found to be more effective in their practice of school social work as they were accessible and easily identifiable as social service professionals by other support personnel involved in schools.
- DSD supervisors and other department colleagues supported school social workers when they needed hands-on support or experienced challenges in their work.
- DSD and SGB school social workers had access to laptops and cell phones to assist them in fulfilling their practice roles with schools and learners.

Conclusion: The study findings show that school social workers have access to various support structures and resources. For instance, the presence of a provincial school social work manager within the DSD helps with the recognition and coordination of school social work services in schools, and support from colleagues and supervisors was also apparent. Access to technological tools such as laptops and cell phones enhanced the practice as school social workers could easily communicate with school, learners and parents, improving effective service delivery.

8.2.2.2 Schools And Learners' Willingness To Receive School Social Work Services

The study revealed that schools and learners were often open to school social work services, therefore suggesting an evident need for the practice in school settings:

- Some schools and school administrators were supportive and welcoming to school social work services. School social workers not placed in schools were provided with office space for one-on-one intervention. This recognition and support validated that school social workers were providing valuable services.
- Schools and teachers contacted school social workers to support learners exhibiting psychosocial problems such as behavioural problems, truancy, absenteeism, etc. However, support requests were more reactive than proactive. In schools where SGB employed social workers, DSD school social workers were requested to provide statutory services.
- Learners positively engaged with school social work services. In some instances, they would self-refer, suggesting there was less stigma involved with regard to seeking help from social workers. The need to use school social work services was perceived as the learners being uncomfortable talking with their teachers about these problems.

Conclusion: The findings suggest a strong demand for school social work services in public schools. The demand stemmed from schools and learners being more receptive to the support provided by social workers, particularly in addressing psychosocial issues and challenges of learners. This demand was more reactive than proactive, showing that school social work services were needed when problems such as learner misconduct or school absenteeism occurred. Therefore, there is a need for increased awareness and integration of school social work services in education environments to address psychosocial issues before they escalate.

8.2.2.3 Administration and staffing challenges at the department of social development

The study found that structural issues related to administration and staff employment at DSD affected the practice of school social work in public schools:

- There is a severe shortage of school social workers to provide school social work services in the province's DSD and GDE compared to the large numbers of schools that need social work support services. The ratio of school social workers to schools differed from region to region or district to district. In some instances, one social worker serviced more than 10 schools. Social work staff seems to be prioritised in other departmental units and programmes. The inadequate staffing, high school allocations and high intervention targets form part of systematic issues within DSD.
- Due to the low staffing of social workers and frequent crisis cases requiring immediate intervention, the administration load was less prioritised and, therefore, impacted. Family preservation services that needed follow-up sessions were also affected.
- No budget was allocated for materials for learners in groups or during awareness campaigns (e.g., play therapy tools, refreshments, and reward items). In some instances, the lack of these materials discouraged learner participation, affecting the preventative programmes developed by social workers.
- The number of vehicles within DSD and GDE was not sufficient for school visits especially because the social workers were not placed in schools and had to transfer to their allocated schools. To respond to this insufficiency, the social workers shared vehicles based on a scheduled roster. This was affected in cases where immediate intervention was needed in certain schools because of a crisis. In some instances, vehicle use within each department was affected by the prioritisation of other programme such as educational exam activities and the distribution of food parcels.

Conclusion: The study suggests the significant effects of structural issues within the DSD and GDE on the practice and effectiveness of school social work. Staff shortages, inadequate resource allocation, and logistic challenges hindered the social workers' ability to provide comprehensive social work services in a timely manner. Addressing these systematic issues is necessary for improving and providing school social work interventions and supporting the overall well-being of learners.

8.2.2.4 Administration, structural and logistic constraints at the schools

This study revealed that social workers face barriers related to administration processes and institutional structures at school level. These barriers affected the practice of school social work:

- School administrators and teachers were reluctant to complete Form 22. This was perceived as being due to the legal implications, as these matters involved the police. This affected the effective tracking and follow-up of reported cases.
- Non-functional SBST (i.e., one school staff member responsible for SBST, having no SBST, frequent changes in SBST coordination) affected school social work intervention (i.e., referral processes, and the overall collaborative relationship).
- Some schools prioritised the teaching of learners and the curriculum. Therefore, DSD and SGB social workers were often not allocated time in the timetable for campaigns and group work. This affected preventative intervention projects.
- Individual learner sessions were affected as DSD social workers were often not provided with offices for one-on-one sessions and in some instances held sessions in their cars, under trees and in libraries. Privacy and confidentiality were compromised.

Conclusion: The findings reflect that administration and structural barriers in the school environment include reluctance to complete necessary reporting forms, non-existent or dysfunctional SBSTs, time restrictions for intervention and services, and inadequate facilities that compromise the ability of social workers to provide timely and confidential services. These issues hindered effective social work services therefore addressing these issues is paramount for improving the quality of school social work services and promoting the well-being of the learners.

8.2.2.5 Role Confusion and perception issues

The study indicated misunderstanding over the function of social workers within educational institutions and the associated challenges faced by social workers in delivering services to public schools in Gauteng:

- Some school administrators misunderstood the roles of social workers as they would pass their educational work to them, perceived as professionals who conduct educational assessments, and refer cases outside the scope of school social work.
- Some school administrators saw social workers as outsiders and not an integral part of the school community, undermining their ability to trust and establish effective working relationships with the schools. In some instances, teachers intimidated and bullied social workers.
- The practice roles and demarcations of other units and programmes within DSD were not clear, leading to social workers in the school social work programme being assigned responsibilities that fall outside their primary role.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that school social workers were faced with challenges when it came to fulfilling their roles in the school environment due to misunderstandings and misalignments of their functions with their other colleagues. For instance, school staff often misperceived their functioning leading to unrealistic expectations and undermining the school social workers. The lack of clear role demarcations affected expectations and understanding of the practice of school social work at the DSD which contributed to school social workers' challenges. Therefore, addressing these issues is necessary for interdisciplinary and collaborative partnerships.

8.2.2.6 Coordination and collaboration difficulties

The study revealed that school social workers experienced challenges while attempting to form collaborative partnerships between the Departments of Social Development and the Department of Education and between school social workers, parents, and other professionals and experts:

- There were inconsistent definitions and understandings relating to high-risk schools between DSD and GDE, which in some instances affected the prioritisation and allocation of cases to DSD school social workers. High risk seems to be related to academic outcomes and psychosocial development. This is the effectiveness of school social work services in addressing the complex needs of learners.
- Considering structural issues DSD school social workers experience, it was highlighted that GDE did not provide any support in terms of human resources or resources such as transport, even when frequent requests were made. The MOU did not make any provision for specific support.

- Collaboration did not exist without challenges. In some instances, there was a lack of collaboration as stakeholders would not pitch at planned programmes, forcing school social workers to improvise and provide support outside their expertise. Working in silos was another reported challenge when it came to collaboration.
- Parental support and involvement were lacking across schools and district/ regions. In some instances, school social workers were verbally abused by parents who did not want their involvement with their children. This affects social work intervention.

Conclusion: The findings of the study underscore the challenges with collaboration which hinder effective working relationships between school social workers, DSD, GDE, parents and other support professionals. These include inconsistencies with how high-risk schools are understood in the two departments, inadequate support from GDE, and resistance from the parents and other stakeholders. These significantly affected the abilities of school social workers to provide support and address the complex needs of the learners. Overcoming these challenges is important for the practice of school social work and providing adequate support for learners.

8.2.3 The current and perceived education and training requirements of school social workers in the Gauteng Province

The literature included in Chapter Two, specifically, Section 2.5 highlights the practice of school social work as a specialised field that requires formalised education for any social work in a school social work role or a social work role requiring them to provide services and support to learners and schools. This requirement is well-established in high-income countries such as the United States, where practitioners need a master's qualification or certificate in school social work practice. This is also suggested by the National Association of Social Work. In contrast, the South African context presents a different landscape. The literature presented in Chapter Two reflects that social workers servicing schools do not need a formal qualification specific to school social work practice, as the practice is yet to be gazetted as a recognised specialisation. Owing to this, the findings from this study contribute to the knowledge gap of education and training requirements of school social workers in the South African context.

This focus is the first in terms of research to give social workers actively working in education systems the voice to share their thoughts and perceptions on education and training needs. The findings revealed that 21 out of 22 participants had formal certification in school social work practice obtained from completing short courses in school social work. These short courses were

significant as they exposed the participants to what it means to be social workers in school social work practice.

While this confirms that the social workers were exposed to training opportunities, the study highlights a pressing need for continuous training and development opportunities. This need arises from on-going knowledge gaps, the evolving nature of school environments and the increasing complexity of challenges experienced by learners. Additionally, the participants emphasised that before placement/ deployment in schools, social workers should gain experience in other social work fields and receive specialised training on school social work practice. These insights are significant as they contribute to the recommendations for the training and placement of social workers in schools. These recommendations are presented later under 8.3.2 (Qualifications, knowledge and practice requirements in school social work).

A summary of the findings on the current and perceived education and training requirements of school social workers in the Gauteng province is reported in the subsequent sections. Key conclusions are drawn from these findings.

8.2.3.1 Exposure to training and professional development opportunities

The study revealed that school social workers in school social work practice have been exposed to different training and professional developments:

- Most school social workers were exposed to trauma debriefing training through DSD and local NPOs/NGOs. These training sessions were significant for school social workers as they frequently deal with crises, and they need to be empowered to recognise and respond to the crises, traumatic experiences and reactions in the school setting with learners and school administrators.
- Most school social workers were exposed to training on working with learners who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+. This helped them promote the values of non-judgmental attitudes, and being professionals in their practice and cautioned them on the use of language when supporting LGBTQIA+ learners.
- Most school social workers received training on child protection services. This helped them understand processes related to statutory cases, removing children due to safety concerns, and the Children's Act.
- Most of the school social workers had completed accredited school social work practice training. DSD school social workers completed it with the University of the

Witwatersrand, where the training was a short course. SGB school social workers completed it with private training with a qualified academic social worker. At the end of training, they received competence certificates to practice school social work.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that school social workers, mainly within the DSD, have been exposed to several diverse training and professional development opportunities in their different employment organisations. For instance, training included trauma debriefing support, LGBTQIA+ support and child protection support. These have all equipped school social workers to effectively identify and support learners with complex needs. School social workers have also completed accredited short courses and workshops on school social work to enhance their professional competence. The findings underscore the significance of on-going training and development in shaping the effectiveness of school social work interventions and services.

8.2.3.2 Perceived education, training, and experience needs for school social workers

The study revealed that training in school social work and experience in generic social work was necessary for any appointment of school social workers:

- There is a need for continuous training opportunities or refresher courses to address evolving issues related to cyber-bullying, suicide, drugs, and cultural and spiritual matters among learners.
- Although school social workers had reported that they were not experts in mental health issues, but had to identify such cases and refer them accordingly, they felt a critical need for enhanced training in mental health to better support learners facing issues such as depression and having suicidal thoughts. The crucial need for this is due to school social workers feeling vulnerable when addressing such issues.
- To understand the complexity of school social worker roles, specialised training before being placed in school social work posts was reported to be necessary. The training would help familiarise the social workers with the context of school social work and the school environment.
- Prior experience in other social work fields (e.g., statutory social work) would be ideal for successfully navigating the complexities of school social work and the school environment. New social workers were reported to be overwhelmed with working in schools. Prior experience in other fields would provide valuable foundation knowledge on statutory work, legal and procedural work in social services, and would ultimately contribute to their confidence in service provision.

Conclusion: The findings reveal the need for specialised training and experience for school social work posts. Continuous professional development for school social workers is important as emerging issues such as cyber-bullying and mental health challenges occur in school settings. In school social work posts, prior experience in other social work fields would provide a foundation for navigating the complexities of a school environment. School social workers should be exposed to school social work training before or early in their employment. By investing in comprehensive experience and training, it is possible to enhance the practice of school social work.

8.3 RECOMMENDED PRACTICE GUIDELINES AND OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN THE GAUTENG PROVINCE

8.3.1 Introduction

The researcher recommended these guidelines to broadly provide an overview of services by school social workers in public school settings in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. The necessity of the guidelines is based on the understanding previously highlighted in this study, that practice and training guidelines would provide a framework for intervention for school social work practice. These guidelines would assist in positioning practitioners as key respondents to social issues in school settings and support the proficiency of school social workers or social workers servicing schools. Ultimately, this would lead to the recognition and formal establishment of the practice as a specialised field, bringing significance to the profession.

8.3.2 Overview

These recommendations are developed solely for the Gauteng Province considering the large number of multifaceted barriers to learning that school-going children experience and the unique complex context of school social work services. The recommendations also take into consideration the state of school social work in the province as presented in this study's Chapters Five, Six and Seven, and also take into consideration work done by Vergottini (2019), the scheduled national draft regulation for the practice of school social work by the DSD (2020) and gaps presented in this study (i.e., lack of standardised guidelines for social workers in school social work practice, role confusion on practice parameters, lack of research on the education and training of practitioners, systematic issues related to policies and accommodation of practitioners, etc.).

Considering that school social work in South Africa has not been regulated as a speciality by the government (SACSSP, 2024), and the uniqueness of the Gauteng Province context, and for the effort of clarifying professional titles, a school social worker should be any registered social worker appointed by a specific school, the DSD and the GDE to specifically and only provide direct school-based social work services.

All adaptations recommended should be made in accordance with relevant policies and mandates within the departments, such as contractual agreements with employed school social workers and the scheduled national draft regulation for the practice of school social work by the DSD (2020) as recommended by the Professional Board of Social Work and SACSSP. The recommendations support province implementation for school social work services to recognise school social workers and ensure effective service provision province-wide while waiting for South Africa to develop and implement national guidelines for school social workers. They outline the adaptations needed to ensure that learners receive psychosocial services while at school and experience minimum learning barriers. These recommendations are, therefore, intended for decision-makers, policymakers and managers at the GDE and Gauteng DSD provincial levels, and school employers of school social workers.

8.3.3 Definition and purpose

- School social work practice in the Gauteng province requires specific, systematically developed guidelines to assist practitioners and clients in making informed decisions about appropriate support services.
- These guidelines aim to provide a framework for effective school social work practice, ensuring that practitioners are well-positioned to address social issues within school settings.
- The guidelines are designed to support the proficiency of school social workers and contribute to the recognition and formal establishment of school social work as a specialised field.

8.3.4 Context consideration

Different practice areas and employment contexts, even within the same province and the same organisation, may require different approaches to designate essential school social work services and to re-orientate systems to maintain these services. In these different practice areas, it must be

acknowledged that the existing inconsistencies in professional titles and decision-makers, managers and employers must balance the benefits of specific activities with the needs of the context.

The services rendered by each school social worker should depend on the local school’s challenges and social context and the school’s capacity for services at baseline and changes in the psychosocial needs of learners. In employment contexts where school social workers are tasked with servicing a wide range of schools, employers must ensure that human resources and operational resources are in place in order for services to reach all schools and learners. In settings where school social workers are employed within specific schools, employers must ensure the presence of operational resources.

8.3.5 Practice guidelines in terms of roles and responsibilities of school social workers

Individualised intervention with learners and their families	School-wide intervention and group centred intervention
Create conducive environments that support teaching and learning	Conduct needs assessments and collaborate with other stakeholders (e.g., SBST)
Advocate for social justice and child protection at school and home	Design and implement school programmes to address social issues (e.g., teenage pregnancy, bullying, mental health)
Conduct interviews and assessments with learners	Encourage interdisciplinary in awareness campaign (e.g., NGOs, community groups, GDE, DSD)
Provide counseling and trauma debriefing to learners	Leverage national campaigns (e.g., child protection week, mental health awareness week, pregnancy awareness week)
Conduct home visits and provide family services	
Remove children when child abuse is suspected	
Provide parental skills training and support	

Figure 8: Recommended practice roles and responsibilities of school social workers

8.3.5.1 Individualised intervention with learners and family

School social workers should conduct an initial, comprehensive assessment of the learners and family systems to gather information about psychosocial problems affecting their development, and then provide support aimed at contributing to learners’ academic success, psychosocial well-being, and social adjustment.

- School social workers should perform detailed interviews and assessments to understand the specific needs of learners and their families.

- School social workers should provide counselling services aimed at addressing the psychosocial needs of the learners and helping them cope with issues such as behavioural problems, emotional distress, trauma, and grief.
- Where necessary, school social workers should conduct home visits to understand family systems and dynamics and assess and address challenges (e.g., child abuse, school absenteeism, lack of resources, social grant mismanagement, and poverty) within the learners' environment.
- School social workers should provide family mediation/ preservation services aimed at improving the relationships and addressing any conflicts between the learners and their parents/ caregivers.
- In school settings, school social workers should facilitate and provide parents with workshops or individual psycho-education sessions during the home visit to educate them on parental skills, effective disciplinary methods, supporting their children's academic and psychosocial development, guiding parents to recognise and support learners' mental health, help families understand the impact of their home environment on their child's learning outcomes, and inform parents about social work services.
- School social work should safeguard learners' rights in the school setting and home environment, against issues such as cases of abuse, neglect, and school discriminatory practices (e.g., towards pregnant learners and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and corporal punishment).

Recommended key actions	
☐	Employers to include these roles and responsibilities as part of the school social workers professional duties.
☐	GDE and DSD to develop comprehensive assessment tools for school social workers to use in gathering relevant information from learners and families.
☐	Employers to provide rooms or offices on the school premises that ensure confidentiality. If rooms or offices in schools cannot be provided due to lack of space in schools, employers should invest in mobile site offices/ containers to accommodate school social workers
☐	School social workers to explore possible use of multiple intervention provision methods, including telepractice to ensure that services are continuous for the learners and parents in cases where support cannot be provided during school hours or in school settings.

8.3.5.2 School-wide intervention and group-centred intervention

School social workers should conduct school-wide awareness campaigns and facilitative group sessions (i.e., with learners, and with teachers) to address prevalent social issues and promote a supportive school environment.

- School social workers should conduct needs assessments in coordination with school personnel, specifically SBST members responsible for school psychosocial support and Life Orientation teachers, to determine the main social issues impacting learners.
- School social workers should design and implement programmes tailored to the identified needs that address issues including teen pregnancy, substance misuse, bullying, child safety, mental health, and raising awareness about children's rights. These programmes may be facilitated in small groups or as school community projects
- School social workers should collaborate or participate in interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary teams with stakeholders including community groups, NGOs, the Department of Education, the Department of Social Development and the Department of Health in school-wide campaigns and group sessions specifically addressing school social issues affecting learners.
- School social workers should make use of national campaigns, such as Child Protection Week, to spread knowledge of the rights and obligations of children as stated in the Children's Act. Other national campaigns to leverage may include Mental Health Awareness Week and Pregnancy Awareness Week.

Recommended key actions	
☐	Employers to include these roles and responsibilities as part of the school social workers professional duties.
☐	Employers should encourage collaboration with school personnel (e.g., SBST members, Life Orientation teachers) to identify prevalent social issues.
☐	Employers to utilise national campaigns and resources as planned by the education department to enhance the impact of school social work interventions.
☐	School employers and GDE must allocate time and resources for group sessions and awareness campaigns (i.e., where possible, leverage Life Orientation syllabus and align school social work services with the subject content)

8.3.6 Operational strategies for ensuring effective school social work services

These recommended operational strategies are essential for effective school social work practice because they establish the systemic and professional context that enables direct interventions with learners and families. Institutional structures and administrative tools, like adequate human resources, clear education-related policies, and administrative resources, are necessary to support service delivery.

A unified framework and collaboration promote coordination and avoid duplication of services. Ethical guidelines ensure responsible and principled practice. Finally, qualifications, knowledge, and practice requirements guarantee that practitioners are competent and prepared to address the complex needs of learners and school communities. These strategies are presented in the subsequent section.



Figure 9: Recommended strategies for ensuring effective school social work services

8.3.6.1 Addressing the human resources shortage

Addressing the reported issue of a shortage of school social workers and their low deployment in public schools and education districts is paramount.

- Schools and relevant departments (i.e., the School Social Work unit at the DSD and the Learner Psychosocial Support unit at the GDE) should hire additional school social workers to ensure manageable caseloads.

- As per suggestions by the National Association of Social Workers (2012, p. 18), “school social work services should be provided at a ratio of one school social worker to each school building serving up to 250 general education students, or a ratio of 1:250 students. When a school social worker is providing services to students with intensive needs, a lower ratio, such as 1:50, is suggested.”

Recommended key actions	
☐	GDE and DSD to map the actual psychosocial needs for school social work in the province.
☐	GDE and DSD to develop a recruitment and retention strategy to attract and retain qualified professionals.
☐	Employers to coordinate additional funding from the provincial government and private sector to support the employment of school social workers.
☐	DSD to consider re-deploying social workers from other programmes to assist in school social work programmes such as awareness campaigns.

8.3.6.2 Education-related policy updates

Structural systematic issues within public school settings, DSD and GDE, which undermine the practice of school social work (e.g., lack of clear roles and demarcations of school social workers in policies such as SIAS, Integrated School Health Policy, and specific school policies) need to be addressed through policy reforms. Specifically, policy reform should be centred around the following:

- Policies with suggested programmes for supporting learners need to be strengthened at a national and provincial level to recognise the multifaceted roles that school social workers can fulfil in the school system.
- The policies must recognise that school social workers, as psychosocial support practitioners, are placed in a school setting and are at a great advantage to make meaningful and impact changes in learners’ lives; and that they are an integral part of school professionals necessary for supporting schools and learners.
- The policies should provide clear practice functions for social workers which positions school social work as a speciality at the national and provincial level.

Recommended key actions	
☐	GDE to establish a task force to review existing policies (i.e., SIAS and ISHP) and identify areas for reform, specifically on the services provided by school social workers.

☐	GDE to engage with stakeholders, including school social workers, professional associations, and community organisations, in the policy reform process.
☐	GDE and DSD to develop clear policy guidelines that define the roles and responsibilities of school social workers.
☐	Employers to actively participate in policy discussions and advocate for changes that support effective practice.

8.3.6.3 Administrative support and tools

To ensure effective practice, school social workers should be provided with functional and professional settings. These settings should encourage the values of confidentiality for one-on-one services to learners and their families and contribute to effective record keeping. Specifically, the recommended administrative support and tools should include the following:

- Rooms or offices on the school premises that ensure confidentiality (e.g., mobile site offices/ containers for public schools without offices to accommodate school social workers).
- Functional office equipment (e.g., laptop/ computer, printer/s).
- Cell phone devices for communication with learners, their families, and stakeholders.
- Increase transportation services or availability of vehicles needed for school and home visits for school social workers stationed in DSD and GDE regional/ district services.
- Intervention resources (e.g., play therapy kits and materials).
- Prioritising funding resources for the school social work deployment in public schools.
- Increase staffing allocation within DSD and GDE of school social workers.

Recommended key actions	
☐	Conduct an audit of existing resources and identify gaps in administrative support.
☐	Develop a plan to provide school social workers with the necessary facilities, equipment, and resources.
☐	Establish clear procedures for accessing and maintaining resources.

8.3.6.4 Unified framework and collaboration

In the light of challenges related to coordination, collaboration and support identified in this current study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the practice of school social work between the different service providers (i.e., specific public schools, DSD and GDE).

- Improved interdepartmental collaboration between DSD and GDE.
- Standardised definition and prioritisation criteria for social work services.
- Develop a shared, comprehensive definition of ‘high-risk schools’ that considers both the academic performance and psychosocial factors of learners in public schools, therefore ensuring an alignment between DSD and GDE.
- Fostering a collaboration culture between school social workers in specific public schools, DSD and GDE
- Collaboratively define intervention prioritising to ensure alignment between GDE and DSD, and where possible, with other organisations providing school social work services.
- Establish a task force that comprises representatives from GDE, DSD, and school social workers employed by SGBs to assist /oversee school social work programmes in public schools, the resources, and address challenges in real-time.
- Where possible (e.g., in specific regions or districts), joint training and team-building exercises between school social workers in the different entities should be presented to foster mutual understanding and break down the ‘us vs. them’ mentality.

Recommended key actions	
☐	Employers to establish a joint task force to develop a unified framework for school social work services.
☐	GDE and DSD to develop standardised protocols for referral, assessment, and intervention.
☐	Employers to implement a shared data management system to facilitate communication and collaboration.
☐	School social workers to participate in interdepartmental meetings and training sessions to foster collaboration.

8.3.6.5 MOU reinforcement

The MOU should be re-informed as per its vision as noted by the Department of Social Development (2021, para. 9) "Through the signing of the MOU, the Department of Social Development and Education established effective working relations. Our strides, as stated in the MOU, are to ensure that schools receive psychosocial support to improve conditions of learning, and address social, emotional, and behavioural barriers to learning that impede learners' functioning and development. Notwithstanding efforts we have made to contribute to the overall well-being and academic performance of learners within a healthy, safe, and secure environment have progressed positively."

- The MOU should provide explicit descriptions of the roles of social workers in the different programmes that they facilitate in school and with school-going children.
- This needs to be reinforced and become operationalised to clarify roles, responsibilities, and collaboration expectations.
- The reinforcement would help avoid possible duplication of services and efforts and ensure efficient utilisation of resources.
- School administrators and staff in different public schools receiving services from DSD school social workers need to be educated about the MOU and the role of school social workers in promoting adherence and cooperation towards the MOU.

Additionally, a different structure should be considered for the placement and deployment of school social workers in the GDE, the following is recommended:

- If the MOU continues to exist within the province as an agreement between the two departments, GDE should accommodate the DSD school social workers within the education district for effective service provision and a more holistic approach to supporting learners' well-being, as school social workers can address their social, emotional, and educational needs in coordination with various stakeholders already working with support units in the district offices.

Recommended key actions	
☐	GDE and DSD to review and update the existing MOU to ensure clarity and relevance.
☐	GDE and DSD to develop a plan for the effective implementation and monitoring of the MOU.
☐	GDE to provide training to school administrators and staff on the MOU and the role of school social workers.
☐	GDE and DSD to ensure that school policies and procedures are aligned with the MOU.
☐	GDE to encourage communication and collaboration between school staff and school social workers.

8.3.6.6 Ethics and values

School social workers practising in schools should adhere to and promote the ethics and values of the social work profession as outlined by the SACSSP (2004, p.4), “social workers’ conduct as well as providing guidance with ethical challenges”, while understanding the uniqueness of school social work practice, needs of schools, learners and their families.

School social workers providing services to school should respect the dignity and worth of individuals, families, groups and communities and strive towards providing quality services. “Practitioners strive to uphold and protect the fundamental human rights of client systems and themselves, as enshrined in the South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights” SACSSP (2004, p.5). In pursuit of quality services, social workers aspire and subscribe to the core values and principles guiding social work practice outlined by SACSSP. These include respect for human dignity and worth, upholding human rights, professional competence, integrity, professional responsibility, service delivery, and social justice.

- Respect for human dignity and worth: Social workers should uphold the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals, families, groups, and communities.
- Respect for human rights: Social workers should advocate for and protect the fundamental human rights of clients, as enshrined in the South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights.
- Competence: Social workers should strive for high standards of competence, continuously updating their knowledge and skills to provide effective and ethical services.
- Integrity: Social workers should conduct themselves with honesty, transparency, and accountability, adhering to high moral standards.
- Professional responsibility: Social workers should prioritise the well-being of their clients and the public interest, acting in a responsible and ethical manner.
- Service delivery: Social workers should provide quality services that are culturally sensitive, accessible, and responsive to the needs of their clients.
- Social justice: Social workers should work towards promoting social justice and addressing systemic inequalities that impact the well-being of individuals and communities.

Recommended key actions	
☐	Employers must ensure that the SACSSP Code of Ethics is apparent in practice contracts.

8.3.6.7 Qualifications, knowledge and practice requirements in school social work

Social workers practising within the field of school social work should have a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) as per South African requirements and maintain annual registration with the SACSSP. In addition to the foundational BSW, it is strongly recommended that these social workers be equipped with specialised training or workshops on the practice of school social work. This training should i) be accredited by the SACSSP, ii) be provided by a South African higher

education institution or a qualified professional with relevant experience and qualifications related to school social work and iii) provide formal certification accredited and approved by SACSSO and/or South African Qualifications Authority. Such training should equip social workers with the essential knowledge and skills needed to navigate unique school social work practice experiences and challenges of the school environment. The content covered in the training should include essential topics such as the scope of school social work practice, understanding the South African basic education systems, roles and responsibilities of school social workers, problems experienced by learners, specific interventions for learners, child protection services and statutory work, services to vulnerable children such as those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and orphans, and contributing to learners psychosocial and mental health development, to adequately prepare school social workers. It is recommended that school social workers gain at least 1-2 years of practice experience in general social work practice, preferably in statutory social work-related fields before placement in schools or being deployed to service schools. This experience/knowledge should specifically involve exposure to child protection cases, working with teachers and collaborating with other professionals in education settings. Additionally, the employer (DSD, GDE or specific public schools) should offer continuous professional development opportunities to address emerging psychosocial issues.

Recommended key actions	
	Mandate school social work CPD training for all current school social workers. This training can be offered online in a series of workshops, and can be free of charge or be charged at an affordable price.
	Establish government funding opportunities (bursaries or stipends) to support participation in specialised training.
	Employers should prioritise the employment of social workers with the required qualifications and 1-2 years of experience in general social work practice.
	School social workers should pursue relevant training and continuing education (i.e., related to support services and practice with school-going children) to enhance their knowledge and skills.

8.4 PROPOSED TRAINING WORKSHOP FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN THE GAUTENG PROVINCE

8.4.1.1 Overview

In the previous section, the study recommended that school social workers be equipped with accredited training. In this recommendation, the researcher suggests that one of the key actions

that training is offered online in a series of workshop CPD activities at no cost to practitioners. While the intention of this study was to identify training needs and recommend the development of education and training guideline, this study further proposes the development of a free, accessible, SACSSP-accredited training programme for school social workers, which could serve to capacitate school social workers with the essential knowledge and skills needed to navigate unique school social work practice experiences and challenges of the school environment. This accredited programme would be facilitated by the researcher and implemented at a later stage as a result of this PhD study.

As identified in this study, the training content would be centred around essential topics such as the scope of school social work practice, understanding the South African basic education systems, roles and responsibilities of school social workers, problems experienced by learners, specific interventions for learners, child protection services and statutory work, services to vulnerable children such as those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and orphans, and contributing to learners psychosocial and mental health development, to prepare school social workers adequately. The information presented in this proposed training takes into consideration information required in the SACSSP CPD training application form (FORM E.2.1).

8.4.1.2 Overall activity information/ description

- Type of CPD activities - Online components of the CPD activity: Fully (100%) online (facilitated) and Fully (100%) online (independent)
- Type of group activity - Workshop, Group discussion/s and Information session
- Workshop title - Capacitating School Social Workers for Effective School Social Work Practice
- Location of CPD activity - Virtual on Microsoft Teams
- Date (s) of CPD activity - TBC (six workshops in total, each an hour long)
- Target group(s) - Registered Social Workers working in or deployed to school settings (GDE, DSD, or SGB-appointed)
- Expected number - Maximum of 30 participants

8.4.1.3 Activity process and content information:

The overall objectives of the workshop series are i) to capacitate school social workers with the essential knowledge and skills needed to navigate unique school social work practice experiences and challenges of the school environment and ii) to enhance school social workers' competence

in providing trauma-informed, inclusive, and contextually responsive services. The sessions below are examples of the various workshop sessions that will be held:

- Session 1: This workshop would provide an introduction to school social work in the context of South Africa and Gauteng. It recognises that school social work services are growing in the country and that practice is dependent on the context in which one is employed. Therefore focusing on the origins and development of the practice, distinctions between school social work and other helping professionals (i.e., counsellor, therapist) it contextualises school social work in Gauteng. The workshop would expose practitioners to the National draft guidelines for school social work, the research findings of this study, and the research work done by Vergottini (2019) and Kemp (2024) in other provinces.
- Session 2: This workshop should provide an introduction to crisis and crisis intervention as a model of school social work practice. It recognises that school social work services in most practice contexts are crisis intervention-focused and thus focuses specifically on the definition of crisis and crisis intervention, theories of practice in crisis interventions, necessary skills in crisis management, and strategies to consider for crisis intervention.

As part of the training workshop, the participants will be involved in group discussions, complete interactive quizzes and worksheets, and complete journal entries. Short exercises will be done where the participants will be required to link content shared and presented to them with real-life case studies related to learners' barriers to learning and school situations.

Ethics are integrated throughout the sessions. Specifically, each session will cover SACSSP ethics and their applications in school social work services, and the participants will explore ethical dilemmas through case studies and reflective discussions

It is hoped that the training will develop the participants' technical skills, such as psychosocial assessments, group facilitations, designing programmes, and related skills. Soft skills, such as communication, setting boundaries, teamwork, and empathy, will also be developed.

Written activities and exercises will be used to gauge the participants' depth of learning.

8.4.1.4 Training evaluation and attendance register

An evaluation form will be used at the end of the training workshops. The participants will complete an online Microsoft form rating the training and each workshop presented in terms of whether the learning objectives were met. This will capture general feedback and provide data for

continuous improvement of the workshops. An attendance register will also be kept for all workshop sessions to track the participants' attendance.

8.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study specifically explored the state of school social work in the Gauteng province. Future research may focus on other aspects of school social work that would contribute to knowledge in this growing field in South African education settings. These aspects are noted below.

- Evidence-based research is needed on the effectiveness of school social work practice in supporting learners, which contributes to their academic success. As such, research should be focused on exploring the effectiveness of school social work services in addressing the psychosocial development of school-going children and their contributions to learners' academic success.
- Research should be done to evaluate specialised qualifications for school social workers in South African tertiary education, such as the Masters in School Social Work offered by the University of the Witwatersrand, to strengthen the practice of school social work and professional qualifications.
- Considering that school social workers function in schools and work with teachers to support learners, comprehensive research into this collaborative partnership would help strengthen it. Specific research can be focused on an exploration of teachers and school social workers perceived factors that contribute to effective interdisciplinary collaboration.
- As some schools, especially those in remote and underserved areas do not have access to social workers, and to bridge gaps, research into teleservices or tele-support services is crucial. As such, research may be undertaken to explore the perceptions of key informants on the acceptability of teleservices for school social work practice.
- In acknowledging the challenges faced by children in special needs schools, an investigation into the roles of school social workers in supporting school-going children living with disabilities is necessary.

8.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This PhD study focused on the current state and practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province, by exploring the practice experiences of school social workers, the contextual factors

that act as facilitators and barriers to the practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province, and the current and perceived education and training requirements of school social workers in the Gauteng Province. As part of their roles, social workers employed by the DSD and SGB specifically to support learners provided individualised services to learners and their parents. They supported teachers in dealing with psychosocial barriers to learning experienced by learners and collaborated with other stakeholders to provide holistic intervention.

The GDE social work supervisor, with a non-traditional social work supervisor role, was responsible for providing crisis intervention to learners and services such as assessments, counselling and trauma debriefing. Various contextual factors were identified as facilitators of school social work practice, such as support from the DSD provincial office and appointment of supervisors, support from colleagues, being placed at district offices, and learners and schools requesting support.

Challenges existed in the practice of school social work which acted as barriers and included a lack of school social work appointments at the DSD and GDE which impacted service provision and administration, confusion about the role of school social workers by school staff and social workers in other programmes and units, and issues with collaboration on school intervention programmes.

Lastly, the majority of social workers providing support to schools and learners had completed specialised training in their school social work and certifications, they were exposed to various training and capacity-building opportunities, however, still need continuous training to deal with mental health cases. Prior experiences in generic social work and school social work training were highlighted as necessary for school social work job positions.

While problems exist with the current state of school social work in the province, the study highlights the significance of social work services in supporting schools, learners and their parents and teachers. Deliberate actions need to be taken by the Gauteng DSD and GDE on the structure of school social work services, as recommended in this final chapter.

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ANNEXES

APPENDIX A: UKZN RESEARCH ETHICAL CLEARANCE



30 October 2023

Gift Mbongeni Khumalo (223137200)
School of Applied Human Sc
Howard College Campus

Dear GM Khumalo,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006346/2023

Project title: An exploration of the current state and practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province.

Degree: PhD

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 15 October 2023 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. **PLEASE NOTE:** Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 30 October 2024.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX B: GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	24 August 2023
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2023– 30 September 2023 2023/378
Name of Researcher:	Khumalo GM
Address of Researcher:	[REDACTED]
Telephone Number:	[REDACTED]
Email address:	223137200@stu.ukzn.ac.za
Research Topic:	An exploration of the current state and practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province.
Name of University:	University of KwaZulu-Natal
Type of qualification	PhD (Social Work)
Number and type of schools:	15 Districts
District/s/HO	15 Districts

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission is granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to the research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

1. Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.
3. **Because of the relaxation of COVID 19 regulations researchers can collect data online, telephonically, physically access schools or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.**
4. **The Researchers are advised to wear a mask at all times, Social distance at all times, Provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and Sanitise frequently.**
5. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
6. A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.
7. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.
8. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.
9. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.
10. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.
11. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.
12. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
13. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.
14. On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.
15. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.
16. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Dr. GUMANI Mukatuni
Acting CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 25/08/2023

2

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

APPENDIX C: DSD RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER



GAUTENG PROVINCE
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Enquiries: Dr. Sello Mokoena
Tel: [REDACTED]
File no.: 27/11/2023

Dear GM Khumalo

RE: APPLICATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE GAUTENG DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Thank you for your application to conduct research within the Gauteng Department of Social Development.

Your application on the research on *"An exploration of the current state and practice of School Social work in the Gauteng Province"* as approved by *University of Kwazulu- Natal* been considered and approved for support by the Department as it was found to be beneficial to the Department's vision and mission. The approval is subject to the Department's terms and conditions as endorsed on the 13th November 2019.

You have permission to interview departmental officials and beneficiaries, conduct observations and access relevant documents where necessary.

May I take this opportunity to wish you well on the journey you are about to embark on.

We look forward to a value adding research and a fruitful co-operation.

With thanks



Dr Sello Mokoena
Director: Research and Policy Coordination
Date: 27/11/2023

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM (SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS)

Date: _____

Good day,

My name is Gift Khumalo (223137200), and I am a PhD candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College. My contact details are [REDACTED] and 223137200@stu.ukzn.ac.za.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on the practice of school social work. The aim and purpose of this research is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current state of the practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province by exploring and analyzing practice experiences, practice context, and the education and training requirements of school social workers. The study is expected to enrol a minimum of 15 social workers working in Gauteng's education system. It will involve me interviewing you and I may observe you during practice in a school setting. The duration of your participation, if you choose to enroll and remain in the study, is expected to be 45 mins to 1 hour for the interview and at least two days of observation.

There are no risks or personal benefits associated with participating in this study. Your participation will help contribute to knowledge on the field of school social work within the Gauteng Province and hopefully influence practice guidelines and policies.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number: 00006346/2023)

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact me at 223137200@stu.ukzn.ac.za, [REDACTED], or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw participation at any point. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation, you will not incur any penalty. You may also choose not to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering.

Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Your name will be withheld, and I will be using pseudonyms during the research process. I will guarantee that in my thesis, your name, and any other identifying details are not noticed. To ensure confidentiality, the record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held on a password-protected computer accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After transcribing the recording for the write-up process, I will dispose of it and the transcriptions will not have any of your identifying details.

CONSENT

I (*full name of participant*) have been informed about the study entitled: The State of School Social Work in the Gauteng Province: An exploration of social work practice experiences, practice context and education and training requirements, by Gift Khumalo.

- I understand that I will participate in interviews, and I may be observed during practice.
- I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.
- I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.
- I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.
- If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at 223137200@stu.ukzn.ac.za, [REDACTED].
- If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

.....

ADDITIONAL CONSENT

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Date: _____

APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM (SUPERVISORS AND KEY INFORMANTS)

Good day,

My name is Gift Khumalo (223137200), and I am a PhD candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College. My contact details are [REDACTED] and 223137200@stu.ukzn.ac.za.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on the practice of school social work. The aim and purpose of this research is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current state of the practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province by exploring and analyzing practice experiences, practice context, and the education and training requirements of school social workers. The study is expected to enroll a minimum of 15 social workers working in the Gauteng's education system. It will involve me interviewing you. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be 45 mins to 1 hours for the interview.

There are no risks and personal benefits associated with participating in this study. Your participation will help contribute to knowledge on the field of school social work within the Gauteng Province and hopefully influence practice guidelines and policies.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number: 00006346/2023).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact me at 223137200@stu.ukzn.ac.za, [REDACTED], or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw participation at any point. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation, you will not incur any penalty. You may also choose not to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering.

Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Your name will be withheld, and I will be using pseudonyms during the research process. I will guarantee that in my thesis, your name, and any other identifying details are not noticed. To ensure confidentiality, the record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held on a password-protected computer accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After transcribing the recording for the write up process, I will dispose it and the transcriptions will not have any of your identifying details.

CONSENT

I (*full name of participant*) have been informed about the study entitled: The State of School Social Work in the Gauteng Province: An exploration of social work practice experiences, practice context and education and training requirements, by Gift Khumalo.

- I understand that I will participate in interviews.
- I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.
- I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.
- I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.
- If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at 223137200@stu.ukzn.ac.za, [REDACTED].
- If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

.....

ADDITIONAL CONSENT

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

.....

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Demographic information

Sex: Male or Female

Number of years as a social worker: ____

Number of years providing services to GP schools: ____

Qualification/s: ____

1. Could you provide an overview of your role and responsibilities as a school social worker in Gauteng schools?
2. How do you think that these responsibilities align with the needs of learners and schools?
3. Please describe any existing collaboration between you as a school social workers and other professionals in practice in the school setting.
4. What are the common barriers that you as a school social worker in the Gauteng Province face when providing services to learners and schools?
5. How do you navigate the challenges that you encounter in your role of being a school social worker?
6. Are there any facilitators or supportive factors that enhance the practice of school social work in Gauteng schools? If yes, please explain.
7. Did you receive any training in your role as a school social worker? If yes, please describe the training you received.
8. Please share your views on the education and training requirements for the placement of school social workers in Gauteng schools.
9. Are there any professional development opportunities that you have been introduced to at work that have contributed to your school social work role? If yes, please tell me about them.
10. How do you think that you as a school social worker in South Africa can be better equipped to address the social needs of learners?

11. How do you think that you as a school social worker in South Africa can be better equipped to address the mental health needs of learners?

12. What support or resources do you think would be beneficial in improving your role in school social work?

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISORS

Demographic information

Sex: Male or Female

Number of years as a social worker: ____

Number of years providing services to GP schools: ____

Qualification/s: ____

1. Could you provide an overview of the role and responsibilities of school social workers in Gauteng schools?

2. How do you think that these responsibilities align with the needs of learners and schools?

3. Please describe any existing collaboration between you as a school social workers and other professionals in practice in the school setting.

4. Could you provide an overview of your role and responsibilities as a supervisor to school social workers in Gauteng schools?

5. What are the common barriers that affect the practice of school social work in Gauteng schools?

6. How do you help the school social workers navigate the challenges that they encounter during their practice?

7. Are there any facilitators or supportive factors that enhance the practice of school social work in Gauteng schools? If yes, please explain.

8. Can you provide insights into the documents that guide the practice of school social work in Gauteng schools?

9. Do you think that these documents support or act as a barrier to effective service delivery of social work services in schools? Please share your reasons with me.
10. Are there any specific areas or aspects within the documents that you believe could be improved to enhance social work service delivery in schools?
11. What are the current education and training requirements for school social worker posts in Gauteng schools?
12. Please share your views on the education and training requirements for the placement of school social workers in Gauteng schools.
13. Are there any professional development opportunities that have been introduced at GDE/DSD to contribute to the role and practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province? If yes, please tell me about them.
14. How do you think that school social workers in Gauteng be better equipped to address the social needs of learners?
15. How do you think that school social workers in Gauteng be better equipped to address the mental health needs of learners?
16. What support or resources do you think would be beneficial in improving the practice of school social work?

APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR KEY INFORMANTS

Demographic information

Sex: Male or Female

Number of years as a social worker: ____

Number of years providing services to GP schools: ____

Qualification/s: ____

1. Could you provide an overview of the role and responsibilities of school social workers in Gauteng schools?

2. How do you think that these responsibilities align with the needs of learners and schools?
3. Could you provide an overview of your role and responsibilities as a social worker at GDE?
4. Are there any facilitators or supportive factors that enhance the practice of school social work in Gauteng schools? If yes, please explain.
5. What are the common barriers that affect the practice of school social work in Gauteng schools?
6. Can you provide insights into the documents that guide the practice of school social work in Gauteng schools?
7. Do you think that these documents support or act as a barrier to effective service delivery of social work services in schools? Please share your reasons with me.
8. Are there any specific areas or aspects within the documents that you believe could be improved to enhance social work service delivery in schools?
9. What are the current education and training requirements for the placement of school social workers in Gauteng schools?
10. Please share your views on the education and training requirements for the placement of school social workers in Gauteng schools.
11. Are there any professional development opportunities that have been introduced at GDE to contribute to the role and practice of school social work in the Gauteng Province? If yes, please tell me about them.
12. Based on your experiences and insights, what policy or practice recommendations do you have for improving the practice of social work services in Gauteng schools?

APPENDIX H: ORIGINALITY REPORT FROM TURNITIN



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The state of school social work practice in the Gauteng Province: An exploration and analysis of practice experiences and education and training needs.

Gift Khumalo

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Social Work
in the School of Applied Human Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Supervisors
Dr Nalwazi Ngcobo
Prof. Mhongoi Sithole

The state of school social work practice in the Gauteng Province: An exploration and analysis of practice experiences and education and training needs.

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