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Psychosocial challenges faced by vulnerable learners in selected primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Background: Vulnerable learners in primary schools often face a plethora of psychosocial challenges, which impact their academic performance. Globally, the number of vulnerable children in schools is increasing drastically, with sub-Saharan Africa reporting the highest prevalence.

Aim: This study explores the psychosocial challenges faced by vulnerable children in schools, particularly orphaned and neglected children in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Setting: The study was conducted in 26 primary schools under the Esikhaleni Senkosi Circuit within King Cetshwayo District.

Methods: Guided by an interpretivist research paradigm, the researchers adopted a qualitative approach using exploratory and descriptive research designs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 purposively selected school social workers from 26 primary schools within the Esikhaleni Senkosi Circuit. The thematic data analysis method was used to analyse the data.

Results: Findings reveal maltreatment in the form of neglect and emotional and physical abuse as prominent problems facing vulnerable school children. Other problems cited include financial constraints, malnutrition, lack of birth certificates, bullying and low self-esteem.

Conclusion: The study concludes that these problems lead to the poor psychosocial well-being of vulnerable children, which in turn affects their academic performance in school.

Contribution: This study is in line with Sustainable Development Goal number 4: Quality Education, which advocates for creating supportive environments that nurture the mental and emotional growth of school learners.

Keywords: psychosocial well-being; school social worker; vulnerable children; KwaZulu-Natal; South Africa.

Introduction

The high number of vulnerable children has been a global issue affecting all the countries of the world, including South Africa, the focus of the present study. Matshepete, Makhado and Mashau (2025:2) and Mwoma and Pillay (2015) found sub-Saharan Africa to have the biggest percentage of vulnerable children globally. Similar observations were made in a study by Mwoma and Pillay (2015), meaning that the issue has been persistent for more than 10 years. Several studies (Hlalele 2012; Hoosen 2015; Nduna & Jewkes 2012) have defined vulnerable children in similar ways. Hoosen (2015:11) viewed vulnerable children as children who encounter emotional, physical, psychological and social challenges resulting from numerous factors, including sexual and emotional abuse and neglect, disability, limited access to services, HIV or AIDS, child-headed households, poverty and a lack of access to food, education, shelter, healthcare and clothing (Hlalele 2012; Mwoma & Pillay 2015; Simbayi 2006; Skinner & Davids 2006). Munyati (2006), as cited by Hlalele (2012:66), defined a vulnerable child as a child who lives in difficult conditions, for example, a child living in a poor household with a sick parent, children in child-headed households, those depending on old, frail or disabled guardians and those children in households that take on additional dependency through taking in orphaned children. On the same note, Pudpong et al. (2023:162) observed that primary school learners living with a single parent experienced psychosocial difficulties, including emotional and behavioural problems, which eventually result in a drop in academic performance. For Nduna and Jewkes (2012), vulnerable children are those children who are in poverty, children who have experienced abuse and are placed in institutions or child-headed households, and those living with disability. In this vein, vulnerability has negative effects on the person's life which may be physical, psychological,

social, spiritual or developmental in nature (Olowokere & Okanlawon 2016:42). In practice, the academic performance of most orphaned and neglected children is not noteworthy. This could be attributed to several factors, such as emotional, physical and psychological issues. Similarly, Kyaruzi (2022) observed that vulnerable children displayed emotional and behavioural problems which significantly impacted their academic performance. Thus, Hoosen (2015) acknowledges that vulnerable children require support in their development.

It is against this background that the role of school social workers is of the utmost importance. A social worker plays various roles, which may differ depending on the setting in which they are practised. In a school setting, which is the context of this study, the role of a social worker is to address social and psychological issues of school children which may hinder their academic progress. Shokane, Masoga and Blitz (2020:4) observed the role of school social workers as working with learners individually or in groups, and to provide support for families to address emotional and social issues that affect the child's well-being. According to Kemp (2014:23), 'the school social worker serves a crucial role and functions as mediator, negotiator, consultant and advocate for what is in the best interest of the client system'. School social workers advocate for the rights of children to education, ensure that learners are emotionally, physically and psychologically present in the classroom, and enhance respect and dignity for all learners through working with the school, families and communities to promote good teaching and learning for school children (NASW 2012:1). Notably, there are many contributory factors to child vulnerability in most South African schools which affect the psychosocial well-being of children and lead to their negative academic performance. Psychosocial well-being is essential for all human beings as it promotes positive human development (Hlalele 2012). The present study focuses on vulnerable children who are orphaned and neglected in primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This article forms part of a broader study that examined the role of school social workers in promoting the psychosocial well-being of vulnerable children within the Esikhaleni Senkosi Circuit primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

Literature review

Psychosocial problems of orphaned and neglected school children

The study focused on vulnerable children of school-going age who are orphaned and neglected. Hall (2024) observed that in 2022, there were 2 800 000 orphans living in South Africa. During the course of the larger study, KwaZulu-Natal, which is the second most populated province in South Africa and the focus of the present study, was marked as having the highest number of orphans at 679 000, followed by the Eastern Cape with 417 000. Promisingly, more recent data from Statistics South Africa (2024) shows that KwaZulu-Natal has moved to fourth place, with the Free State and North West provinces now recording the highest numbers of orphans in the country.

Evidently, orphans experience several psychosocial problems. A study conducted by Alem (2020) on 'investigating psychosocial problems of orphaned children in primary schools' revealed that orphans in primary schools in Injibara, Ethiopia were faced with psychosocial problems that include financial problems, poor nutrition, problematic behaviours both in the classroom and outside the classroom, loneliness, constant worries about their life, feeling highly marginalised and unnoticed by the school community and other community members, poor health, lower participation in school activities and numerous anxieties. This concurred with Saraswat and Unisa (2017), who also highlighted loneliness and helplessness, behavioural disorders, low self-esteem, depression and stress as psychosocial problems experienced by orphans and vulnerable children. Similar psychosocial problems were also noted in the study by Simbayi (2006:12), which highlighted depression, feelings of loneliness and externalised behaviours, such as aggression, to be psychosocial problems facing orphans. On the other hand, Ngwu, Nnama-Okechukwu and Obasi-Igwe (2017:201) noted being abused, stigmatised and discriminated against, having their inheritances denied after the death of their parents, and post trauma after the death of their parents as problems associated with vulnerability. Given the above, it is essential to provide psychosocial support to vulnerable learners to promote their emotional, social and psychological well-being (Bimha & Sibiya 2023). One can deduce from what these authors are saying that orphans without psychosocial support tend to experience psychosocial challenges. These challenges that orphans face not only affect their emotional, social and psychosocial well-being, but also have an impact on their academic performance.

Child neglect remains a persistent concern that affects all the countries of the world and may be caused by various risk factors. Parkinson et al. (2017:38) identified these risk factors as domestic violence, parent-child relationship, family structure, family or household size and socio-economic status. Other causes of neglect of children by parents or caregivers include stress in the family, a low level of education, immature personality, having a personality disorder, aggressive personality, underdeveloped sense of responsibility, being a victim of neglect and addiction to alcohol, medication or drugs (Biçakçi, Er & Aral 2016:224). Morantz et al. (2013:10) identified stigma, alcohol abuse, living with nonbiological parents and poverty as the contributory factors that lead to child neglect in orphaned children. The study by Pillay (2016:3) found that orphans and vulnerable children who search for alternative living arrangements, particularly community-based homes, were faced with abuse and neglect from caregivers. Given the numerous psychosocial challenges facing school children, school social workers have a prominent role to play in addressing those problems to promote the academic success of the vulnerable children at school and their psychosocial well-being. This accords with the view of Olowokere and Okanlawon (2016:42), who articulated that it is vital to support vulnerable children in school to promote their well-being, lifelong achievements and academic success, as the

school environment is the second home of children. Again, Pretorius (2020:150) emphasised the significant role that is played by school social workers in the school context as a way of encouraging good academic performance and the overall well-being of children.

Educational challenges

There are several educational challenges vulnerable children encounter. Alem (2020:54) revealed that orphans were reserved, unwilling to participate in school activities and were more likely to be absent from school. Ndlovu (2022), Mwoma and Pillay (2016:88–90), and Magampa (2014) identified several challenges that orphans and vulnerable children face in schools that hinder their academic progress, such as a lack of concentration in class, reading and writing challenges, submitting school work late or not doing their homework, absenteeism, lateness and low self-esteem, as well as a lack of cleanliness. Similar challenges were also noted by Magampa (2014:44), which included a lack of concentration, inability to do school work, behavioural and emotional problems, and feelings of unhappiness, rejection, shame and isolation. Motsa and Morojele (2016:35) observed that household chores that are given to vulnerable children tend to hinder them from fully participating in school work as they have to focus more on the chores compared to school work, which eventually negatively impacts their academic progress. The study by Motsa and Morojele (2016:47) also found that because of neglect and abuse, vulnerable children were not obeying some of the school rules such as arriving at school on time, completing assignments and wearing proper school uniforms, which leads to corporal punishment by teachers. The study by Mwoma and Pillay (2015:4) found that there was minimal provision of psychosocial support to orphans in primary schools because of a lack of professionals such as social workers, psychologists and counsellors.

Hoosen (2015:45) also noted further challenges that vulnerable children come across in schools, which include a lack of interest in schoolwork, presenting discipline problems, displaying a lack of respect for self and others, and being affected by bullying. Ringani (2018:101) highlighted poor academic performance, lateness and unruly behaviour as challenges of vulnerable children in school. Additionally, Makhonza (2018:151) noted a number of challenges that orphans and vulnerable children encounter in schools, with a lack of support from teachers and neighbours or communities being one of the dominant challenges, among others. The challenges experienced by vulnerable school children not only have an impact on their academic success but also contribute towards their poor psychosocial well-being. This study is in line with Sustainable Development Goal number 4: Quality Education, which advocates for creating supportive environments that nurture the mental and emotional growth of school learners.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which focuses on environmental issues and how different systems influence the development of the child. This theory views external forces and surroundings as big determinants of human development (Friedman & Allen 2011:9). The theory has successfully shed some light in terms of the psychosocial challenges encountered by primary school learners, particularly by linking them with the micro and meso levels. Senefeld and Perrin (2014:133) maintain that 'a child's microsystem might include parents, teachers and the educational system, childcare staff, religious institutions, the healthcare system, peers, extended relatives and siblings'. In the context of the current study, the micro level has been linked with low self-esteem and neglect as challenges contributing to learners having difficulties of loneliness and social isolation from peers and teachers at school. The mesosystem is concerned with how different structures of the child's microsystem work together (Paquette & Ryan 2001:1). In this context, the mezzo level was significantly linked to financial constraints faced by caregivers and teachers, classifying them according to socio-economic status. This is a result of a lack of collaboration between teachers and caregivers as well as a lack of support for learners, leading to their psychosocial problems being unattended to. The theory has been significant in showing how the psychosocial experiences of vulnerable children are influenced by multiple social contexts. The theory also assisted with revealing how relationships between these systems affect the psychosocial well-being of vulnerable school children.

Research methods and design

The study applied qualitative research methods to investigate psychosocial challenges of vulnerable school learners in the selected primary schools around Esikhaleni Senkosi Circuit in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This approach was selected for the study because it is generally used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey 2016:499). The interpretivism research paradigm was employed as it is in line with the qualitative research approach adopted in this study. The following research question guided the study: *What psychosocial challenges do vulnerable school children experience in the selected primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal?*

This study used semi-structured telephone interviews with school social workers, allowing the researchers to probe for new questions and provide in-depth information. To ensure an accurate record of the discussions, all interviews were audio-recorded on a laptop after obtaining each participant's informed consent. Consent forms were emailed to the school social workers by the researchers prior to the interviews. The duration of the interview was about 20 min with each participant.

Participants

In this study, 12 social workers were chosen from the Department of Education, the Department of Social Development and one Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), all of whom are based across 26 primary schools

within the Esikhaleni Senkosi Circuit in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. School social workers were chosen for their active and pivotal role in enhancing the social well-being, social justice and social security of school children. The Purposive sampling technique, rooted in non-probability sampling, was employed to select the school social workers to participate in the study. This technique was chosen as the researcher was dealing with one group of the population who share a common role of addressing social and psychological issues that may hinder learners' academic progress. The data from interviews were analysed using thematic data analysis. Original interview audio was translated and coded into writings or texts. Direct quotes and paraphrasing were applied. The study also only targeted school social workers as the study's participants, as they have experience and knowledge of the psychosocial problems school children are faced with and are responsible for the promotion of their psychosocial well-being. As a result, these findings cannot be generalised beyond this study context.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee (No: UZREC 171110-030). Permission to carry out the study was obtained from the Department of Education in Umhlathuze as the employers of the school social workers in the province. Consent forms were developed for the participants in the interviews and were emailed and signed by the participants prior to the interviews. The researcher also put them at ease by first building rapport in order for them to fully express themselves on the subject matter. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and were told that the results would be published as a thesis and in a research article. Anonymity was assured by not collecting any names and personal particulars of the participants. In the data analysis, the researcher coded the collected data by using pseudonyms.

Results and discussion

The research reported on in this article sought to identify the psychosocial challenges faced by vulnerable school children. Participants highlighted several psychosocial problems facing vulnerable children which disturbed their academic performance at school. Three themes emerged from the data regarding the psychosocial challenges experienced by vulnerable children.

Theme 1: Child maltreatment as a psychosocial challenge

Neglect was the most dominant problem experienced by vulnerable children in primary schools. Most participants also indicated that neglect not only affects orphans, but also children who are raised by single parents, grandmothers and teenage mothers. Participants of the study provided numerous causes of neglect, and their responses articulated verbatim are as follows:

> 'Children are usually neglected because they are born into single parents or teenage mothers, children are raised by an elderly person who is old enough and incapable to take care of a child. Some children have teenage mothers who can barely take care of themselves. We also get cases of children who are neglected not necessarily because they are orphans.' (Participant 5, Female, NGO)

> 'Neglect in school children is caused by a lack of parenting skills, dispute between partners/parents which eventually leads to the needs of a child being neglected and no support in raising a child. Most of the referred cases I get are related to child neglect because in most cases children who are neglected by being raised by teenage mothers and dispute between partners tend to fight with children.' (Participant 4, male, NGO)

> 'Some of orphaned children stay with their paternal or maternal aunts who do not properly take care of them like their own children and neglect their needs. Some children are raised by single mothers who leave their children to go and cohabitate, leaving their children to be taken care by their grandmothers.' (Participant 6, Female, DSD)

> 'Child neglect, as a child being raised by a grandmother as there is no strong relationship between a child and the grandmother because of the age gap and the mother is nowhere to be found. Sometimes the mother is present in the child's life but is not that supportive in meeting the child's needs. Another cause of neglect is because children in primary schools are being raised by teenage mothers who are still in high schools and do not have time to take care of their children as they need to focus on their studies.' (Participant 7, female, DSD)

> 'Child neglect is most prevalent in families where there is alcohol abuse by parents and where orphaned children are being raised by their grandmothers.' (Participant 2, Male, DOE)

From the above quotes, it is clear that child neglect was caused by numerous factors such as alcohol abuse in families, grandparents raising children, school-going teenage mothers and lack of parenting skills. Recent studies by Matshepete et al. (2025) and Ndoma and Siachiwena (2023) also found that vulnerable children were faced with challenges of neglect, deprivation and abuse. Findings of a similar nature are also evident in the study by the East African Community (2020), revealing neglect as one of the challenges of psychosocial well-being posing both short-term and long-term mental health impacts in most children. Similarly, Wilkinson and Bowyer (2017) note neglect as the form of maltreatment affecting most children. The study by Herruzo et al. (2020), which compares poverty and neglect, found that externalising and internalising problems, school problems and lack of adaptive skills were associated with children facing neglect rather than those who faced poverty. The impact of neglect is therefore shown in behaviour and in how they relate to their teachers and peers, and in lack of engagement in social interaction.

The study also ascertained that the problem of neglect is not only experienced by children who are vulnerable in terms of orphanhood, but even by children who are being raised by teenage mothers, single parents and grandmothers. Motsa and Morojele (2022:8) found that vulnerable children raised by grandparents often lacked adequate educational support

because of the grandparents' limited understanding of the importance of education. This can have a negative impact on their academic performance, limit their motivation to succeed in school, lead to emotional distress and lower self-esteem, thereby increasing the adverse effects of neglect. Similarly, Anakpo and Kollamparambil (2021:10) observed that children born to teenage mothers were more likely to repeat a grade than those born to older mothers. Neglect can be linked with the micro level of the ecological systems theory. The micro level entails the child's immediate environment, including peers, teachers and parents, whose maltreatment can affect the forming of positive relations between learners and these support systems.

Another participant also noted emotional, physical, and sexual abuse as the forms of abuse experienced by vulnerable children. The abuse is mainly caused by the lack of information or knowledge on the part of caregivers about what constitutes abuse, which in turn contributes to a child under-performing in school. The verbatim response is as follows:

> 'Usually, school children experience physical and emotional abuse because caregivers are not well educated about abuse and how it affects children, which leads to poor academic performance in school. In some cases, you will find that parents are working but they fail to meet the needs of their children.' (Participant 3, Male, NGO)

These findings concur with Pillay (2024), who indicates that more than a quarter of children in South Africa experience physical abuse. Several authors (Downey & Crummy 2022; Özbay, Asagidag & Eker 2024; World Health Organization [WHO] 2022) have noted emotional and physical abuse to be associated with negative effects which include developing mental health disorders, difficulties in forming relationships with their peers, teachers and parents, and behavioural and academic problems. On the other hand, the study by Chinyama, Rembe and Sibanda (2020) is of the view that vulnerable learners experience emotional and physical abuse because of invalidation, which makes it difficult for these children to feel a sense of belonging and to build positive relationships within the school environment. It can be deduced that emotional and physical abuse experienced by vulnerable children remains a concern with a negative impact on their overall well-being and development.

Theme 2: The challenges of peer victimisation and negative self-perception

Low self-esteem was also mentioned by participants as being one of the psychosocial problems experienced by vulnerable school children, and it is attributed to several factors. Participants noted the following:

> 'Vulnerable children usually have a low self-esteem which prevents them to perform to the best of their abilities as they are constantly thinking about their mother who passed away and how life would be if their mothers were still alive.' (Participant 1, Female, DOE)

> 'Low self-esteem caused by poverty in the family, self-esteem of vulnerable children is affected by other children who come from better or middle-class families teasing them on how their school uniforms look like.' (Participant 7, Female, DSD)

> 'Vulnerable children are faced with low self-esteem and they end up succumbing to peer pressure and doing things they do not want to which could put their lives in danger.' (Participant 10, Female, DSD)

The above responses from participants reveal that low self-esteem experienced by vulnerable children in schools impacts their academic performance and exposes them to engage in risky behaviours. This could in turn lead to them further jeopardising their academic performance and psychosocial well-being. The findings of the study reveal that vulnerable school learners experienced psychological challenges in the form of low self-esteem and bullying. The study's findings concur with the findings by Thapa (2020), which revealed that orphans had low self-esteem and experienced depression compared to children who lived with their parents. Correspondingly, Saraswat and Unisa (2017) also revealed psychosocial problems experienced by orphans and vulnerable children to be loneliness and helplessness, behavioural disorders, low self-esteem, depression and stress. It is also worth noting that there is a link between bullying and low self-esteem. This is supported by Lefta, Abdulrazaq and Shlash (2023) who assert that learners who experience bullying are most likely to develop low self-esteem.

Some participants noted that bullying is experienced by both children who come from middle-class and disadvantaged backgrounds. Selected responses from this study's participants are presented here:

> 'Most of the bullying happens in primary schools. Bullying can happen either way; the neglected children who come from disadvantaged/poor/poverty-related background children get together to bully children who come from advantaged backgrounds by stealing their lunch boxes/money and sometimes children who come from better/middle-class background bully those from the disadvantaged backgrounds through name calling.' (Participant 12, Female, DSD)

Another participant noted stigma as a psychosocial problem encountered by vulnerable children and articulated the following:

> 'School children are faced with stigmatisation. Teachers tend to classify children, whereby you will find that some are treated better than others. When teachers address school children, they address them according to their social class and status.' (Participant 7, Female, DSD)

From the above responses, it can be deduced that vulnerable children not only face bullying by other learners but also stigmatisation by school teachers because of their social class and status. In this vein, this study revealed that bullying was linked to the learner's socio-economic status as learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds were at high risk of being bullied. Pillay (2021) and Juan et al. (2018:3) also agree that socio-economic status is a risk factor that is associated with bullying, and learners with a low socio-economic status were more likely to be victims of bullying than learners who had a

high socio-economic status. School is supposed to be a welcoming and safe place for learners, and it is therefore important that school social workers promote inclusive learning environments to ensure that all learners, including those who are vulnerable, feel safe and respected.

Theme 3: The challenges associated with socio-economic vulnerabilities

One participant noted that caregivers face financial problems as most of them are not from this country (South Africa) and lack documentation to apply for stable jobs and child support grants. Other causes of financial hardships that were noted by the participants were linked to orphans being raised by grandmothers who rely on social grants. One participant stated the following:

> 'Most caregivers do not originate from this country (South Africa) and therefore do not have the required documents to apply for child support grant, usually work in nearby farms and cannot find stable jobs.' (Participant 8, Female, DSD)

This concurs with the findings by Alem (2020) and Thida, De Gruiter and Kuppens (2020), who revealed that orphans in primary schools in Injibara were faced with psychosocial problems that included financial problems, poor nutrition and poor health. Similar findings were revealed in the studies by Eneji and Archibong (2021:188) and Mshengu (2014), who stated that orphans experienced financial constraints. Moreover, a study by Madlela (2024) revealed that learners from low-income households were more likely to be absent from school regularly without permission. It can therefore be deduced from these findings that financial constraints among vulnerable learners have an impact on their well-being, health and school attendance.

Participants also highlighted malnutrition as being one of the psychosocial problems experienced by vulnerable children. However, they stated that the schools played a big role in providing nutritional meals. Selected responses from the study's participants are presented below:

> 'Malnutrition in vulnerable children is a problem, but we are grateful that the schools do provide a nutrition programme.' (Participant 9, Female, DSD)

The study also revealed that malnutrition often results from caregivers prioritising their own children's needs and is further exacerbated in child-headed households. One participant responded by stating the following:

> 'Malnutrition is usually present in vulnerable children as the legal guardian or foster care parent only pays attention to their own children and the orphan must take care of herself or himself. There is also that weakness as they usually come from child-headed households.' (Participant 1, Female, DOE)

From the above responses, it can be seen that schools play an important role in providing nutrition to vulnerable children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The problem of malnutrition experienced by vulnerable learners in primary schools is also observed in some previous related studies by Lemeyu, Chikutuma and Zishiri (2022), Van der Berg, Patel and Bridgman (2022), and Sewnet et al. (2021). From these, one can recognise that the provision of nutrition programmes in schools is significant in assisting learners to be present and focused during teaching and learning in class. This is supported by Sanders et al. (2019) and Mwoma and Pillay (2016), who asserted that school nutrition promotes learning achievement, endurance and good health. Therefore, school nutrition plays an essential role for vulnerable children, supporting their physical well-being and increasing concentration in class, which in turn enhances their overall well-being.

Some participants identified the problem of school children not having birth certificates as the most dominant issue. The responses from two of the study participants are articulated below:

> 'In this area, we have people who are from outside South Africa such as those from Mozambique who are renting rooms and do not want to go back to their countries of origin. Some mothers of these children passed away and they are left with their landlords. It is very hard for us to assist children in such cases as we do not even know where to begin in trying to track their families or relatives as the landlord do not either have the family details of the tenant. This makes it impossible for us to compile a report and assist children with the process of getting their birth certificates.' (Participant 11, Female, DSD)

> 'The issue of documentation for many vulnerable children is a stumbling block where a child does not have a birth certificate. Some mothers pass away before applying for their children's birth certificates and the father does not qualify to apply for the child's birth certificate without the mother's consent and the child ends up using a wrong surname. It is even worse when the mother passes away without having an ID or birth certificate.' (Participant 1, Female, DOE)

The issue of documentation is because of parents or caregivers neglecting their children, leaving them to be taken care of by the landlord, and sometimes a child is an orphan being raised by an elderly person. In some instances, the mother dies and leaves her children with the landlord. The issue of a lack of documentation is important as it affects the child in every aspect of their lives and may lead to a child being unable to receive social and health services (Mouravieff-Apostol 2001:1). Beko (2021:6) also notes that a lack of birth certificate affects a child's development, how they receive welfare services, and educational opportunities. This relates to the stipulation by the Admission Policy for ordinary public schools (2021:8), as pointing out that it is mandatory for parents to produce a birth certificate of a learner when admitting them to a public school.

Recommendations

Considering the highlighted conclusions drawn in this study, the study recommends an increase in the employment of school-based social workers as a result of the high caseload social workers usually have to deal with. Furthermore, given that neglect is a dominant psychosocial

problem experienced by vulnerable children, school social workers should conduct home visits regularly to monitor the well-being of these vulnerable children. There should be a collaboration between parents and school social workers to facilitate dealing with the psychosocial challenges of these vulnerable children and ensuring that their social and educational needs are met.

Conclusion

Based on the above findings, it is evident that vulnerable school children experience various psychosocial challenges, with maltreatment manifested through neglect and emotional and physical abuse being most prominent. Other cited problems include low self-esteem, malnutrition, neglect, lack of birth certificate, emotional and physical abuse, bullying and financial constraints. The psychosocial challenges experienced by vulnerable children are a result of various factors, including children being raised by a single mother, grandmothers and teenage mothers, alcohol abuse and peer pressure. These problems have been observed to lead to the poor psychosocial well-being of vulnerable children, which in turn affects their academic performance in school.

Hence, for a child to perform well and succeed in school, they need to feel emotionally and physically safe. Various interventions are used to tackle psychosocial problems of vulnerable children, from case work to group work and community work.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Nomfundo Ndlovo: Writing – original draft. Allucia L. Nkosi-Shokane: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Sithuthukile S. Myeni: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The authors declare that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

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