# ASSESSING THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE THARI PROGRAMME IN PROTECTING CHILDREN AGAINST VIOLENCE AND ENHANCING SCHOOL SAFETY

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**Abstract:** This study examines the Thari pilot programme, developed by the Adopt-a-School Foundation as a potential solution to address school violence and children's psychosocial health in South Africa. Employing an exploratory sequential mixed methods research design (QUAL-quan), the study evaluates the effectiveness of the Thari programme in providing essential psychosocial support services to children. The primary objective of the programme is to foster safe and violence-free learning environments that are academically effective, gender-sensitive, inclusive, and conducive to the health and well-being of all education stakeholders. The paper explores the psychosocial interventions employed by the Thari programme and assesses their contributions in creating secure and violence-free learning environments. The study findings offer support for the utilisation of psychosocial interventions in schools, as evidence suggests that these interventions positively impact school safety.

**Keywords**: Thari programme, psychosocial interventions, social service professionals, school safety, safe parks

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South Africa is confronted with high levels of violence, encompassing murder, attempted murder, rape, and various forms of assault and violent crime (South African Police Service, 2023). As highlighted by van Zyl (2022), a member of Parliament on the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education, crime statistics for the second quarter of 2022/23 indicate distressing occurrences at schools, including 67 reported cases of rape. When all educational premises are considered, there were 19 murders, 258 incidents of assault or grievous bodily harm, and 22 recorded cases of attempted murder (van Zyl, 2022). Additionally, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) received reports of 411 gang-related incidents, along with other violence-related acts such as bullying, corporal punishment, and abuse (van Zyl, 2022). Collectively, these alarming figures underscore the precarious and unsafe nature of the South African school environment (Artz et al., 2016; Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Makota & Leoschut, 2016; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018; Reyneke, 2020).

Educators frequently have to manage children who have encountered violence and abuse both within and outside the school context, experiences that will potentially lead to adverse effects on their learning capabilities (Lynn-Whaley & Sugarmann, 2017; Reyneke, 2020). Despite schools being envisioned as secure spaces for children's growth and development, the above-mentioned statistics indicate that the environment in many educational institutions is unsafe. In response to the detrimental impact of these social issues on children's learning potential, the Adopt-a-School Foundation developed the Thari Women and Children Support programme. The primary goal of this initiative is to ensure that children receive psychosocial support services at school. The programme aims to empower school communities to create safe and violence-free learning environments that foster academic effectiveness, gender sensitivity, inclusivity, and overall well-being for all education stakeholders (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017).

The Thari programme was initially introduced as a pilot initiative in the township of Botshabelo, located within the Motheo District, Free State Province, South Africa. The program's implementation covers eight schools — four high schools, and the primary schools associated with them. These particular schools were known for their elevated susceptibility to various social challenges, including gangsterism, alcohol and substance abuse, and teenage pregnancy, as well as other significant issues such as the prevalence of orphaned and vulnerable children, child-headed households, pervasive poverty, and children facing learning difficulties (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017).

The implementation of the Thari programme within schools is carried out by a team of social service professionals, comprising child and youth care workers (CYCWs) and qualified social workers who also act as supervisors. The CYCWs primarily engage in life-space counselling,

assessments, containment for severe cases[1], group work, and referrals. They are employed at an auxiliary level, meaning they do not have tertiary education but receive in-service training as part of their program. The training includes both a theoretical component and a practical one, in which trainees apply the theory they are learning while providing services to children and their families (National Association of Child Care Workers, 2014). The social workers' engagement involves biweekly visits to offer specialised social work services that cannot be performed by CYCWs. They are employed by the Adopt-a-School foundation and situated in Sandton, approximately 470 km from Botshabelo. By leveraging the expertise of these social service professionals, the Thari programme has facilitated the establishment of collaborative platforms that enable educators, parents, children, and community members to work collectively towards effecting positive changes in the schools. One such platform is the Stakeholder Forum, established to foster collaboration within the community. This forum includes various key players, such as NGOs, departments of the national government, the police, and other individuals committed to contributing to the community and promoting a multisectoral approach. It supports and enhances the Thari programme in the eight schools by intervening in referred cases and facilitating awareness campaigns aimed at preventing violence, substance abuse, teenage pregnancies, and gang activity in schools (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2021).

Furthermore, as part of the programme's initiatives, both formal and informal safe parks were developed and are managed by the CYCWs. These safe parks are intrinsically linked to the schools and serve as vital safe havens for children, contributing to the overall objective of fostering a secure and nurturing environment (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017;).
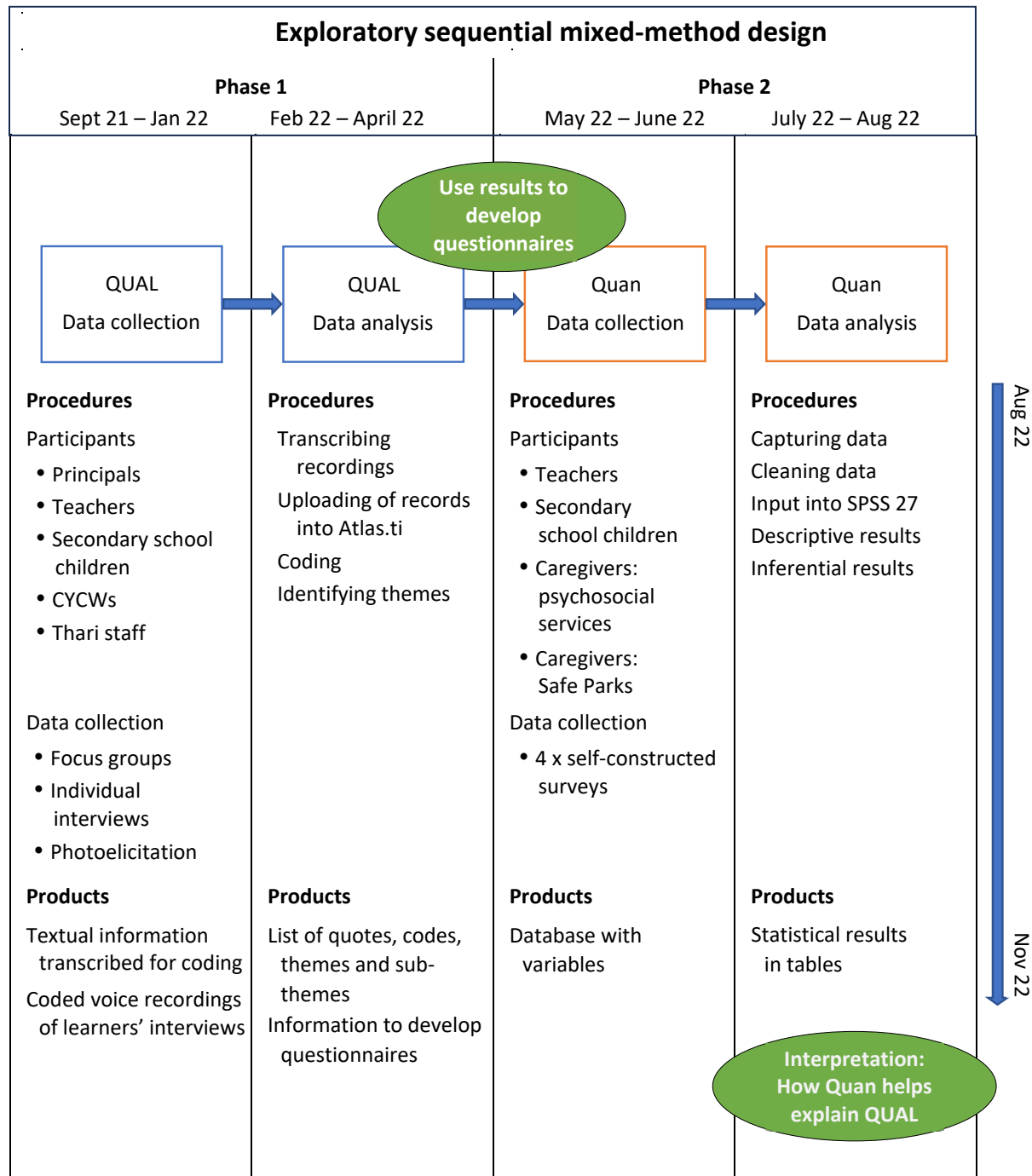
This paper investigates the contribution of the Thari programme to protecting children against violence and enhancing school safety. The findings presented here are from a comprehensive investigation conducted as part of a broader study, which sought to examine the potential of the Thari programme in Botshabelo to bolster the school community's capacity to safeguard women and children from violence and exploitation. The present study aims to explore the psychosocial services employed by the programme and to assess its contributions in creating secure and violence-free learning environments that promote the well-being of all education stakeholders.

## Method

This article reports on an exploratory and descriptive study of the Thari programme as it applies to children. An efficiency assessment (Creswell, 2014) was used to determine the psychosocial support services provided, and whether they contributed to the children's psychosocial health and safety and, more specifically, to a safer school environment.

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[1] Containment involves assisting the children in managing their emotions and conducting an initial evaluation to determine if they require further support, such as counselling, legal interventions from social workers, or assistance from other professionals like educational psychologists and healthcare providers.

Figure 1. *Mixed Methods Procedures Followed*

**Exploratory sequential mixed-method design**

| Phase 1 | | Phase 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sept 21 – Jan 22 | Feb 22 – April 22 | May 22 – June 22 | July 22 – Aug 22 |

Use results to develop questionnaires

| QUAL Data collection | → | QUAL Data analysis | → | Quan Data collection | → | Quan Data analysis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**Procedures**

Participants
- Principals
- Teachers
- Secondary school children
- CYCWs
- Thari staff

Data collection
- Focus groups
- Individual interviews
- Photoelicitation

**Procedures**

Transcribing recordings
Uploading of records into Atlas.ti
Coding
Identifying themes

**Procedures**

Participants
- Teachers
- Secondary school children
- Caregivers: psychosocial services
- Caregivers: Safe Parks

Data collection
- 4 x self-constructed surveys

**Procedures**

Capturing data
Cleaning data
Input into SPSS 27
Descriptive results
Inferential results

Aug 22

**Products**

Textual information transcribed for coding
Coded voice recordings of learners' interviews

**Products**

List of quotes, codes, themes and sub-themes
Information to develop questionnaires

**Products**

Database with variables

**Products**

Statistical results in tables

Nov 22

Interpretation: How Quan helps explain QUAL

*Note*. Adapted from *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (p. 270) by J. W. Creswell, 2014, Sage.

A mixed methods approach was adopted, as combining qualitative and quantitative methods ("QUAL-quan") enables the comparison and synthesis of different perspectives, and provides valuable insights that fuel a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied. An exploratory sequential mixed methods design was utilised; thus, the qualitative research phase,

consisting of semi-structured focus group interviews and individual interviews to explore the participants' views, was conducted first (see Figure 1). The qualitative data was helpful in the development of the questionnaires that were used in the follow-up quantitative phase (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The population of this research consisted of all the educators and CYCWs of the eight participating schools, the Stakeholder Forum, social workers of the Thari programme, and the parents of children receiving psychosocial services from the programme. The sample population consisted of participants selected by purposeful sampling for the qualitative aspect of the study, and by simple random sampling and purposeful sampling for the quantitative part (Maree & Pietersen, 2016), according to predetermined criteria for inclusion (Table 1). The criteria for inclusion were determined by the researcher's prior knowledge (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018). Also, since the study aimed to evaluate a specific programme (the Thari programme), the researcher applied his judgement to determine who should be recruited for the sample (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

Table 1. *Sampling Protocol for Evaluation of the Psychosocial Support Services Offered by the Thari Programme*

| Phase | Information collection | Sampling method | Group composition (no.) | Inclusion criteria |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | In-depth face-to-face interviews | Purposive | Programme manager (1)<br>Thari social worker (1)<br>Secondary school principal from School H (1) | A main role-player in the programme<br>The principal of the school most involved in the project |
| | Semi-structured group interviews | Purposive | Child and youth care workers (9)<br>Primary school principals (4)<br>Primary school SBST educators (8)<br>Secondary school SBST educators (8)<br>Stakeholder Forum members (4) | All child and youth care workers in the programme<br>A educators from an SBST<br>The chairperson and one other available educator from each school<br>An available member of the committee |
| 2 | Survey | Simple random | 15 educators from each school (N = 120) | A educator at a school taking part in the project |
| | Survey | Purposive | 15 parents/caregivers of children receiving psychosocial services from each school (N = 120) | A parent or caregiver of a child who received services from the programme |

*Note*. SBST = school-based support team.

The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling methods. It is worth noting that the generalisation of results derived from non-probability sampling warrants cautious consideration (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Given the specific focus of this study on a particular programme, the objective was not to extrapolate findings to a broader population. Nevertheless,

the information gathered has the potential to offer valuable insights and serve as a basis for understanding similar groups within this specific population.

Qualitative data collection for this study occurred during three semi-structured individual interviews and five focus group interviews. These interviews served as the foundation for comprehending the nuances of the Thari programme and subsequently formulating questionnaires for the quantitative aspect of the research. Upon completion of the initial interviews in phase one, the qualitative data underwent a rigorous analysis and interpretation process, following Braun and Clark's (2013) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The researcher immersed himself in the data by repeatedly reading and familiarising himself with the content. Subsequently, themes and codes were generated to categorise the information. Potential themes were then identified and refined to ensure accuracy and relevance. The resulting themes were formally defined and named. The final phase of the thematic analysis process involved synthesising the findings and compiling the questionnaires for the next phase of the research.

The quality constructs of Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied as principles for ensuring the study's trustworthiness, reliability, and validity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These guiding concepts are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Table 2; Bradshaw et al., 2017; Niewenhuis, 2016).

Table 2. *Guiding Concepts for Trustworthiness, Reliability and Validity*

| Concept | Achieved by: |
|---|---|
| Credibility | Engaging with participants and ensuring a trusting relationship<br>Observing the participants<br>Using multiple sources<br>Performing member checks and giving feedback<br>Providing a thick description of the phenomenon |
| Dependability | Describing the research design<br>Documenting observations and changes made |
| Confirmability | Reflecting on possible factors contributing to bias<br>Using quotes in context and reproducing enough text to ensure that the meaning is clear |
| Transferability | Purposely selecting participants with programme experience<br>Providing a full description of the study in a report so that it can be recreated, and richly illustrating the results |

Prior to the main survey, a pilot study was conducted to ensure that research participants found the questionnaire comprehensible and clear. Following this pilot phase, participating educators and parents/caregivers completed the questionnaires, providing valuable data for the quantitative segment of the study. For data analysis, descriptive statistics were employed, and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28 was utilised as the analytical tool.

Permission for this research was obtained from the provincial Department of Basic Education and from the school principals. Ethical clearance was obtained from the General/human research ethics committee of the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2021/0735/21). The guidelines of Rubin and Babbie (2011) were followed to ensure ethical conduct throughout the study. These strategies included obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, avoiding harm and mitigating risk, maintaining privacy through anonymity and confidentiality, not providing compensation to participants, giving special consideration to high-risk groups such as learners, debriefing participants, and acknowledging contributions and sponsors.

## Results

### *Qualitative Results*

Psychosocial support encompasses the aid provided to individuals during times of crisis that assists them in recovering from disruptions in their lives. This support can be either preventative, aiming to mitigate the risk of mental health issues, or curative, aimed at helping individuals and communities recover from trauma-related psychosocial challenges (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, 2008).

Through data analysis, eight major themes pertaining to psychosocial services for children were identified. To comprehensively examine these themes, the psychosocial interventions framework presented by Galappatti (2003) was applied. This framework outlines 12 specific interventions used by programmes that claim to offer psychosocial interventions. In this study, only the eight interventions supported by the data were included (see Table 3). It is worth noting that certain interventions may overlap in their application.

Table 3. *Themes Related to Psychosocial Services Provided by the Thari Programme*

| Theme | Density |
|---|---|
| Therapeutic services | 18 |
| Awareness-raising and psychoeducation | 13 |
| Mobilising existing networks in the community | 14 |
| Supportive practices for child development | 52 |
| Skills training to improve material security and a sense of self-sufficiency | 19 |
| Provision of material and other support to remove structural threats to well-being | 12 |
| Psychology-oriented skills training | 30 |
| Improving links and interchange | 38 |

*Therapeutic Services*

Children experience emotional problems, and since educators are not trained to deal with these types of problems, the CYCW supports the children with psychosocial support and counselling. This was pointed out by participant SBSTSa[2], who also mentioned that the CYCW visited families and provided feedback to the school-based support team (SBST)[3] on the children's background. A few other participants mentioned that it is helpful to understand the children's situation at home so that they can provide more informed support.

> Mr. [name of CYCW] provided a lot of psychosocial support and counselling. We used to have kids with emotional problems there. We are not trained to counsel, but he was very good in that, and as a result we incorporated him into our SBST, he worked very well with us and then in the event that we were not able to deal with the kid he was always there. He will even visit the family of the child to find out the background of the learner[4], and then will provide the feedback to the school. (Participant SBSTSa)

Although CYCWs are not trained in therapeutic group work, one CYCW participant (CYb) mentioned that they did conduct growth-oriented groups (Toseland & Rivas, 2022). Group work is an effective method to address behavioural challenges: regular group sessions are especially appropriate when many children present with similar problems, such as bullying:

> It depends, in the group work, maybe it is therapy. Concerning the child, maybe behaviours, like maybe it is common behaviours, I put them in group therapy that is maybe working on the problem that he has. (Participant CYb)

As per the National Association of Child Care Workers (2014), the therapeutic aspects of a CYCW's duties encompass several essential elements. These include the imparting of life skills, evaluating and directing children and families to appropriate services, knowledge and skill transfer, and life-space counselling. Life-space counselling refers to providing immediate support and guidance during instances of grief, conflict, crisis, and stress.

Moreover, the CYCWs in the Thari programme engaged in group work involving structured development programmes, like the Young Men Empowerment Programme and the Young Women Empowerment Programme. Additionally, they facilitated peer support groups to further enhance

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[2] Participants are identified by initials representing their roles: SBSTS = school-based support team (secondary school); SBSTP = school-based support team (primary school); CY = child and youth care worker; TM = Thari social worker or manager; SSP =secondary school principal; PSP = primary school principal; SF = member of the Stakeholder Forum.

[3] An SBST consists mainly of educators whose primary function is to put in place coordinated support for children and educators.

[4] In South Africa schoolchildren are referred to as learners.

the effectiveness of their therapeutic interventions (National Association of Child Care Workers, 2018).

The Thari social workers assume a supervisory role, overseeing the work of the CYCWs, and also provide support in addressing challenges beyond the scope of the CYCWs' capabilities. Asked in an interview about the nature of counselling conducted by the CYCWs, participant TMb, a part-time social worker, clarified that the primary focus of the counselling involves helping the children contain their emotions and conducting an initial assessment to ascertain whether they need additional help, such as counselling or statutory interventions from social workers, or support from other professionals such as educational psychologists and health care professionals:

> … it was mostly containment because they will have to rely on our guidance as their managers and social workers, and then rely on the service provider, that is outside. Whether it is social workers, from DSD [Department of Social Development], or other organisations. (Participant TMb )

From this discussion, it is clear that the Thari programme provides various levels of therapeutic support (from lay support to formal therapeutic counselling) as part of the psychosocial intervention.

*Awareness-Raising and Psychoeducation*

Based on the accounts of the participants, it became evident that the Thari programme placed greater emphasis on raising educators' awareness of gender-based violence and behavioural issues in children than on providing psychoeducation. According to participant SPS, before the programme's implementation, educators underwent training and capacity-building to effectively identify and address these issues. Consequently, these interventions, coupled with the awareness campaigns, were found to have positively influenced improvements in the children's behaviour.

The Thari programme incorporates educational initiatives aimed at informing children about the prevalent social challenges within their community. Although participant SPS did not provide specific details on the addressed social issues, he emphasised that the awareness campaigns played a pivotal role in improving children's behaviour. This observation can be linked to the reduction in school gang-related issues and instances of bullying, as evident in Tables 4, 6, and 7. These awareness campaigns were primarily conducted through workshops, with a focus on such crucial topics as the prevention of sexual abuse, bullying, and gangsterism. Additionally, drug awareness and efforts to combat violence against women and children were emphasised. Moreover, life skills programmes were integrated into the educational endeavours, providing children with essential skills and knowledge to navigate challenges and make positive choices in their lives:

> One, immediately when Thari came in, there was also one, I don't know, let me call it a workshop, because it started with educators to try and capacitate them on how to deal with such problems or challenges.… It was also a sort of awareness, and

also trying to teach them about all the social ills that were in here. That also, I think it contributed to ensuring that learners are behaving in a good manner. (Participant SPS )

*Mobilising Existing Networks in the Community*

The Thari programme established a body called the Stakeholder Forum as a pivotal platform that mobilises resources, initiates preventative programmes addressing social ills, and facilitates referrals to specific services. According to participant SFa, the Stakeholder Forum prioritises prevention and outreach initiatives in schools, actively collaborating to identify and address the prevalent social challenges experienced within schools and in the broader community. The Forum's concerted efforts aim to proactively tackle these issues and create a supportive environment that fosters the well-being and safety of community members, particularly children within the educational setting:

> Remember I am in Health, our primary function is prevention.… We joined the Forum because we wanted it to somehow resolve some of the social ills. There are so many social ills that impact on our health. So, it starts from the schools, so we were outreaching to the schools also to the community in the halls. (Participant SFa)

According to Participant SFb, the Forum networks with community stakeholders to recruit them so that affected children can be quickly and efficiently referred for services when necessary:

> I think from a Forum's perspective that is what we strive to do … and I think within our Forum we are still trying to recruit those very key stakeholders such as the rehabilitation centre in Botshabelo. We have been trying to have them on board to be a part of us so that referrals are an easier linkage between all of us. (Participant SFb)

When asked about the Forum and its work, Participant SFc noted that they want to make the community aware of the Forum and of available services. Furthermore, through its networking, the Forum contributes to creating awareness in the community:

> The idea was to make the service users aware of as many as possible of the services that are available.… It has dramatically increased awareness of the services that are available to help people; it has most certainly assisted by using connections and networks with different stakeholders because we thought we didn't really connect much. (Participant SFc)

The Thari programme ensures that there is networking within the community, which, in turn, ensures that the programme is marketed and receives the necessary support to deliver services. The Thari social workers are not always available. Thus, it is necessary to ensure good working relationships with all the stakeholders to refer children quickly and effectively when needed.

*Supportive Practices for Child Development*

The theme of supportive practices for child development came to the fore most frequently in the interviews. Participant SBSTPa explained that children with working parents play at the safe park until their parents return from work:

> As we have said, their parents come home late, some of them are safe to play in the safe park because after school they play at the school in the safe park until late. Maybe when they come home at least the parents will be there. (Participant SBSTPa)

Children also get to do homework and play sports at the safe parks. Participant SSPb said that they like playing soccer and netball. He believes that sports programmes can help the fight against gangsterism:

> [The learners] meet every time to do homework, they meet every time to also have some other activities, like for example, playing soccer, playing netball, and we also have got here this, this is from Thari also. This was also one of the programmes that was meant to also assist the learners, in terms of moving them away from gangsterism and involving them in sports. So the programme was held in the school. (Participant SSPb)

Through structured play, children can be therapeutically supported in dealing with their issues and self-regulating their anger (Gibbs, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Participant SBSTPb stated that Thari contributes to safe schools in this way. She said that when children have had bad experiences, playing helps them to become happier:

> [Learners who] were watching their parents while they did their fighting … they became angry and then they fight with others as well as teachers, then we refer them to Thari and then they attend sessions and those sessions work a lot at my school.… While playing, maybe they play with others, they become a little bit happier, and then it helps a lot those troubled children. (Participant SBSTPb)

Participant CYb mentioned the home visits that the CYCWs do. During these visits, they gather information about the child and report to the school. They also provide supportive services to the child and their family if necessary. Home visits as a theme came up often, and educators felt that they contributed to positive behaviour in children:

> We also support children through social support by conducting home visits.… We also conduct case conferences. We also use case conferences to oversee or to gather more information regarding the matter of the child. (Participant CYb)

> I think also, those children who misbehaved at school or who are bullying others, when the Thari counsellor visited their homes, they changed their behaviour. (Participant PSPa)

*Skills Training to Improve Material Security and Create a Sense of Self-Sufficiency*

Participant SBSTSa told me that one of the CYCWs had introduced basic computer skills training at his school. Because computers have become part of daily life, I consider this to be a helpful initiative even though many children involved in the programme do not currently have access to a computer. The acquisition of these skills could improve their education and help provide material security. Participant SBSTSa further stated that the CYCW assists children with homework and provides general support to them in the sense of being a role model:

> He taught them the basic skills of computer, we have kids who for the first time did not even know how to open the computer, but through him learners were able to operate and develop some basic skills of operating a computer.… He assisted learners with homework especially those that were in his programme, we have seen improvement, you know these kids that look like some of them they just wanted somebody to be close to them. Maybe a father figure of some sort, that is what he provided. (Participant SBSTSa)

Thari uses educational games such as chess and Scrabble to teach children life skills and to help them with their reading skills. Participant PSPb explained that these games are not only for entertainment but also to help children learn to think and be tolerant of others:

> Although we have a barrage of games but chess is very important because it helps them to be patient, to be tolerant, to think properly as they cannot concentrate well. So, it serves the purpose as an entertainment but as well as for educational purposes. (Participant PSPb )

Participant SBSTSb observed that Scrabble helps children to improve their reading and writing, which, in turn, enhances their school performance:

> They are enjoying Scrabble because some of them don't even know how to read and write but they will come up first term they will struggle but second term they will have everything correct, they will be able to read, they will be able to write, they will even be performing better than they were performing when they start coming to our school. (Participant SBSTSb)

It was apparent to me that the programme does much to develop children's skills regarding reading and planning. I observed educational games at the safe parks such as "driving a car" and learning road rules.

*Provision of Material and Other Support to Remove Structural Threats to Well-Being*

The programme includes prevention programmes that address issues such as sexual abuse and the prevention thereof. Although the programme does not provide material support to children, the CYCWs ensure that children receive food as part of the school feeding scheme. Where necessary, families are referred to the DSD or a non-governmental organisation (NGO) for support.

Participant CYc mentioned that it would be helpful if the programme could provide food to the children, especially since this would improve the services offered by the safe parks and increase their attendance:

> The first thing we need is either snacks or food. Because some … come to school with empty stomachs. They only get food when they get here at school, and it is only early at 09:00. So, I mean, 09:00 till 15:00. Mostly the safe park activities happen after school. So, when you have them stay after school, they are already hungry. (Participant CYc)

Recent feedback from schools seems to indicate that, since the problems of bullying and violence are being addressed, poverty and the need for food are now the most pertinent issues. The programme, however, does not function as a charity organisation that hands out donations towards alleviating hunger and poverty:

> We did not want to bring any kind of donation … because we wanted to deal with issues that were actually there, and around safety. And I must say, now hearing from what they were saying, they were saying we no longer have a problem with bullying or violence so we have a problem with a hungry child. (Participant TMa)

Participant SBSTPb explained that children are assisted in getting birth certificates to enable them to receive a child support grant. Participant CYa mentioned that children are referred to the Department of Home Affairs when they need an identity document. If necessary, children are taken to the Home Affairs offices by the CYCW:

> [When] they can't get grants because of the birth certificate, they don't have birth certificate and parents don't care, and then Thari, through Thari we get the birth certificate for the children, they get their grant. (Participant SBSTPb)

> If it is identity document [that is needed], we refer to Home Affairs. (Participant CYa)

In addition, the programme ensures that children have any other documents required to receive grants and to write the National Senior Certificate Examination.

*Psychology-Oriented Skills Training*

At the start of the programme, educators received training with regard to gender-based violence and dealing with children's behavioural problems. Furthermore, participant SPS explained that educators have attended workshops on coping with their own psychosocial problems. He noted that this has helped them a great deal. However, since then, little training has been done:

> It started with educators to try and capacitate them on how to deal with such problems or challenges.… In terms of us as staff members of the school, we also benefited there in terms of, we had workshops that was also meant to deal with some psychosocial problems as educators as well. That, also we did benefit a lot in terms of that one. (Participant SPS)

Participant TMa stated that the CYCWs need ongoing training. She said that the one-year training they had received in the Isibindi programme[5] was insufficient. They needed the CYCWs to be able to work on a more advanced level in both dealing directly with the children's problems and referring them to social workers when necessary. The social workers provide supervision to enhance the capacities of the CYCWs to the best of their ability. However, despite these efforts, it is acknowledged that the level of capacitation remains inadequate. Participant TMa mentioned that they need a more "professional CYCW". In this regard, participant TMb explained that, as social workers, they have been trained in legislation, policies, domestic violence, and sexual offences. He also mentioned the training of other stakeholders (the Forum members):

> We also tried to do a lot of capacity-building.… I still feel they need more training than just the one year of training that they get. It needs to be, there should be an advanced level of child and youth care work. Especially now looking at various areas of work that are coming up, you know. We are used to child and youth care workers working in children's homes and now they are coming out into the community. It was more HIV/AIDS, cooking with the families, and now we want to professionalise the thing. I think we need to start talking about advancing their training, there are a lot of limitations. (Participant TMa)

> … domestic violence, your sexual offences, your Children's Act, those are some of the things that we involved them in when we were training our child and youth care workers and sometimes stakeholders. (Participant TMb)

The programme provides training for CYCWs to ensure that they improve their skills and knowledge. From the interviews, it also became clear that the social workers continuously train and support the CYCWs in dealing with problems.

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[5] The Isibindi model expands upon the family preservation framework and is designed to support children and youth who are at risk due to the illness or loss of one or both parents, potentially leading to their inclusion in child-headed households. It adopts an ecological perspective to address the needs of these vulnerable children.

*Improving Links and Interchange*

The Stakeholder Forum facilitates communication between the community and the Thari programme, ensuring that appropriate referrals are available for the psychosocial service needs of the service users. According to participant TMa, the CYCWs refer many cases to external organisations for psychosocial support, which is necessary because the social workers are not stationed in Botshabelo and only visit the programme from time to time:

> [For] most of the services, unfortunately, we rely on external services with psychosocial support because child and youth care workers can only identify and do a little bit of crisis management and containment but they cannot go you know deeper into the situation. (Participant TMa)

Participant SFc mentioned that representatives from the Department of Health, the South African Police Service (SAPS), and social service organisations serve on the Stakeholder Forum. This makes it easier to get help for the service users since there is a specific person to whom one can refer the user. Participant SFa confirmed that the Forum has brought "everyone on board" that could provide psychosocial support services, which contributes greatly to service delivery:

> Then it is easy for a Forum to service everyone in terms of psychosocial support services because you have got everybody there and then we just refer. So, yes, it helps a lot. (Participant SFa)

> Because we have with us, the Department of Health, we have SAPS with us, we have Social Services with us. So, the link is there and much better and even referral is easier because it is easier to refer to someone that you know you can call them by a name. (Participant SFc)

Participant SFc told me that the networks formed through the Stakeholder Forum are important in holding the programme together. Service users had not known about the available services, but now, through the Forum, they were becoming aware of various service providers. She also said that the Forum has assisted in creating connections and networks with different stakeholders:

> I would say that is the thread that is holding them together. That is the logic of the foundation of the Forum to create those networks because we realised that we have many people offering different kinds of services, except that the service users themselves are not aware of this.… It has dramatically increased awareness of the services that are available to help people. (Participant SFc)

Thus, the Stakeholder Forum ensures that there is linkage and interchange among the various service providers and the Thari programme. This is critical since the programme does not have full-time social workers in the community and has to use external service providers for some psychosocial therapeutic services.

## *Quantitative Results*

In the qualitative study, many psychosocial problems were identified, and educators (*n* = 103) stated what they regarded as the most pressing problems experienced by children. They reported that poverty is the most common problem (82%). This is a cause for concern as poverty contributes to other psychosocial problems, such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), violence, and drug abuse (Bethell et al., 2017).

Learning difficulties (78%) and child-headed households (50%) were also singled out as pressing issues together with parents not caring for their children (68%), children living in unhealthy environments (52%), poor parenting (49%), and traumatic experiences (43%). See Figure 2 for the complete list of pressing issues. A lack of care can cause rebellious behaviour, commonly seen in abusive behaviour and anger towards others (Kanel, 2018; West et al., 2014), which contribute to unsafe school environments.

Figure 2. *Problems Most Commonly Experienced Among Children According to Educators*
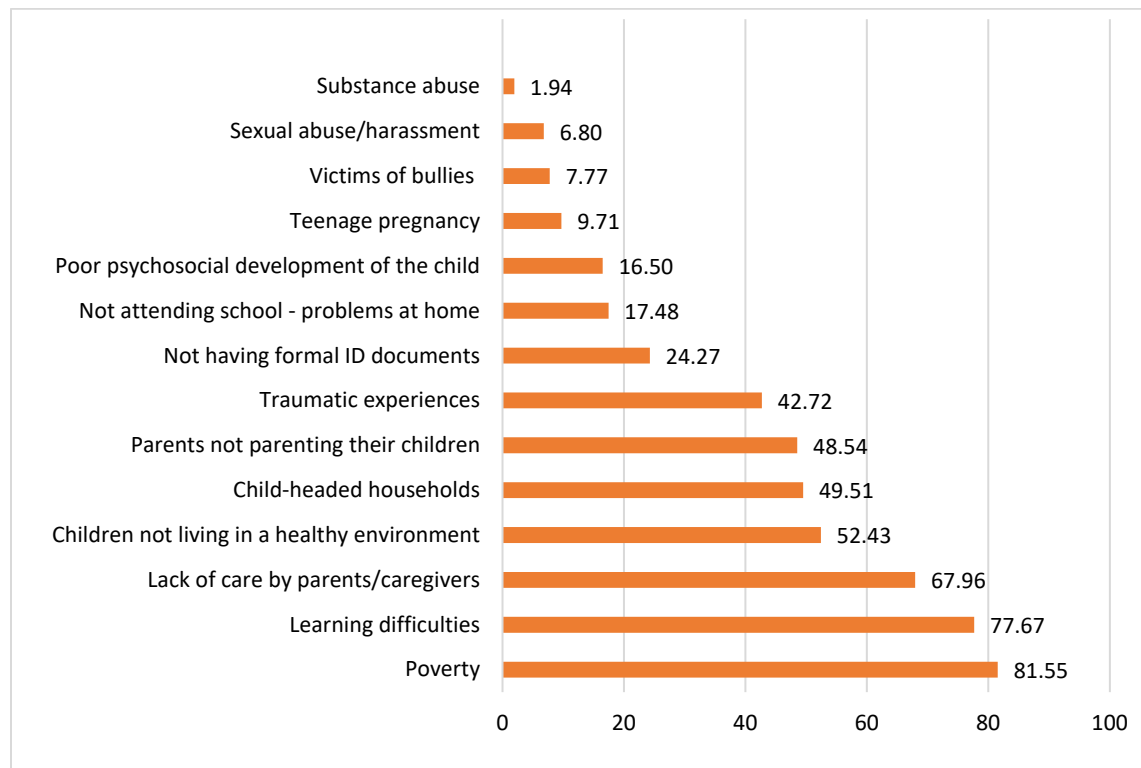


*Note. n* = 103. Values are percentages.

Respondents were asked about school safety since it is part of the programme's focus. Their main areas of concern were gangsterism and classrooms being unsafe, which aligns with reports by Bohnenkamp et al. (2023), Modiba (2022), and Petrus (2021).

*Gangs in Schools*

Gang-related violent activities have been known to compromise the safety of school environments (Mathews et al., 2014). Addressing gangsterism served as a primary motivation for the development of the Thari programme in 2017 (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017). As a result, assessing any changes and transformations in gangsterism that had occurred since the programmme's inception was of paramount importance.

Findings from the survey indicate a noteworthy shift in educators' perceptions concerning gangsterism. The percentage of educators who considered gangsterism to be a problem "most of the time" or "all the time" decreased substantially from 29% in 2017 to only 6% in 2022; conversely, the percentage of educators who perceived gangsterism to be a problem "hardly ever" or only "now and then" increased from 33% in 2017 to 59% in 2022 (Table 4). These data suggest that the Thari programme has been effective in reducing gangsterism within the school environment.

Table 4. *Educators' Views on Gangsterism From 2017 to 2022*

| View on gangsterism | 2017 | | | 2022 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *f* | % | Combined | *f* | % | Combined |
| Hardly ever a problem | 24 | 21.82 | 32.73 | 53 | 48.18 | 58.91 |
| Now and then a problem | 12 | 10.91 | | 12 | 10.91 | |
| Some of the time a problem | 30 | 27.27 | 27.27 | 28 | 25.45 | 25.45 |
| Most of the time a problem | 18 | 16.36 | | 6 | 5.45 | 6.36 |
| All the time a problem | 14 | 12.73 | 29.09 | 1 | 0.91 | |
| Did not answer | 12 | 10.91 | | 10 | 9.09 | |

*Note. n* = 110. Educators were asked to reflect on how they perceived the problem of gangsterism in 2017 when the program first began, and to compare it with their current views on the issue as of 2022, when the questionnaires were completed.

A symmetry test was conducted to assess the changes over time, as presented in Table 4. The results revealed a significant difference between the perceptions of gangsterism in secondary schools for 2017 and 2022 (chi-squared *p*-value < .001). However, the difference was not found to be significant for primary schools (chi-squared *p*-value = .010). This outcome may be attributed to the fact that gangs are a more prominent issue in secondary schools, as suggested by Petrus (2021).

*The Contribution of CYCWs in Addressing Gangsterism*

The responses from participants clearly demonstrate that CYCWs play a crucial role in managing and addressing gangsterism in schools. According to the data, 39% of participants perceived that CYCWs make a "significant" to "large" contribution in this regard, while another 34% acknowledged that they make a "fair" contribution (refer to Table 5). This collective

contribution holds considerable significance as any reduction in gang activity ultimately enhances school safety.

Notably, no statistically significant differences were observed between the two groups in their perceptions of the CYCWs' contribution to addressing the gang problem in schools (chi-squared $p$-value = .071). Both groups agreed that the CYCWs play a meaningful role in assisting schools in tackling the challenges posed by gangsterism. This finding reinforces the importance of the CYCWs' presence and involvement in schools, as their efforts have a positive impact on creating a safer learning environment for students.

Table 5. *Educators' and Cargivers' Views on CYCWs' Contribution In Decreasing Gangsterism*

| CYCWs' contribution | Educators (%) | Caregivers (%) | Average (%) | Combined (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Didn't contribute at all | 7.27 | 7.14 | 7.21 | 14.40 |
| Made a small contribution | 5.45 | 8.93 | 7.19 | |
| Made a fair contribution | 33.64 | 25.89 | 29.77 | 29.77 |
| Made a significant contribution | 25.45 | 15.18 | 20.32 | 34.72 |
| Made a large contribution | 12.73 | 16.07 | 14.40 | |
| I don't know | 10.00 | 23.21 | 16.61 | |
| Did not answer | 5.45 | 3.57 | 4.50 | |

*Note. n* = 222.

*School Safety*

Most educators indicated that they currently feel safe in schools (53%), with 22% "hardly ever" or "now and then" not feeling safe (Table 6).

Table 6. *Educators' Feeling of Safety in Schools*

| Educators' feeling of safety | $f$ | % | Combined % | Cumulative % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I hardly ever feel safe | 13 | 11.82 | 21.82 | 11.82 |
| I feel safe now and then | 11 | 10.00 | | 21.82 |
| I feel safe some of the time | 25 | 22.73 | 22.73 | 44.55 |
| I feel safe most of the time | 39 | 35.45 | 52.72 | 80.00 |
| I feel safe all the time | 19 | 17.27 | | 97.27 |
| Did not answer | 3 | 2.73 | | 100.00 |

*Note. n* = 110.

A significant majority of parents/caregivers (80%) reported that their children feel safe in school, while just 5% indicated that their children felt unsafe (Table 7). An additional 13% of respondents were uncertain about their children's feelings of safety. The data highlight a positive shift, with 80% of children feeling secure in school, which is particularly noteworthy given the prevalence of gangs in secondary schools 5 years previously. This improvement in safety perceptions is indicative of the positive impact of the interventions.

Table 7. *Children's Feelings of Safety in School*

| Children's feeling of safety | *f* | % | Cumulative *f* | Cumulative % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I feel safe | 90 | 80.36 | 90 | 80.36 |
| I do not feel safe | 6 | 5.36 | 96 | 21.82 |
| I am not sure if I feel safe | 14 | 12.50 | 110 | 44.55 |
| Did not answer | 2 | 1.79 | 112 | 100.00 |

*Note. n = 112.*

*Educators' Perception of the Contribution of CYCWs Towards the Safety of Children*

Based on the responses, the CYCWs and social workers were identified as the primary providers of psychosocial services to children. As the front-line social service professionals who frequently engage with the respondents, the CYCWs were the focus of the inquiry. The results demonstrate that the respondents perceived the CYCWs as making a significant contribution to the safety of children, with 83.64 indicating that this contribution ranged from "fair" to "large" (Table 8). Moreover, no statistically significant differences were observed between the responses of the two groups (Fisher's exact test $p \leq 0.104$), indicating a perception in both that CYCWs have had a positive impact on children's safety in schools through their psychosocial services.

Table 8. *Educators' and Caregivers' Views on CYCWs Contribution Towards Children's Safety*

| CYCWs' contribution | Educators (%) | Caregivers (%) | Average (%) | Combined (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Didn't contribute at all | 3.64 | 0.89 | 2.27 | 7.23 |
| Made a small contribution | 4.55 | 5.36 | 4.96 | |
| Made a fair contribution | 43.64 | 30.36 | 37.00 | 37.00 |
| Made a significant contribution | 22.73 | 19.64 | 21.18 | 45.00 |
| Made a large contribution | 17.27 | 30.36 | 23.82 | |
| I don't know | 6.36 | 8.93 | 7.64 | |
| Did not answer | 1.82 | 4.46 | 3.14 | |

*Note. n = 222.*

*The Contribution of CYCWs Towards the Safety of Educators*

When comparing the results from Table 8 and Table 9, it appears that a lower percentage of respondents believe that CYCWs contribute to the safety of educators than believe that they contribute to the safety of children. Table 9 reveals that 74% of the respondents indicated a contribution varying from "fair" to "large" for the safety of educators. It seems plausible to argue that if children feel safe and receive adequate support to address psychosocial issues, there is a reduced likelihood of acting-out behaviours, subsequently creating a safer working environment for educators.

Table 9. *Educators' Views on CYCWs Contribution Towards Educators' Safety*

| CYCWs' contribution | *f* | % | Combined % | Cumulative % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Didn't contribute at all | 7 | 6.36 | 12.72 | 6.36 |
| Made a small contribution | 7 | 6.36 | | 12.72 |
| Made a fair contribution | 48 | 43.64 | 43.64 | 56.36 |
| Made a significant contribution | 21 | 19.09 | | 75.45 |
| Made a large contribution | 12 | 10.91 | 30.00 | 86.36 |
| I don't know | 13 | 11.82 | | 98.18 |
| Did not answer | 2 | 1.82 | | 100.00 |

*Note. n* = 110.

## Discussion

Children's engagement in violent behaviour within schools may be due to various underlying factors, including traumatic events such as the loss of a loved one, experiences of bullying, physical and sexual abuse, and exposure to community and gang violence (Felitti et al., 1998; Hawkes, 2021). Additionally, adverse childhood experiences play a significant role in shaping children's behaviour. Misunderstandings and conflicts, mental health conditions, the use of punitive discipline methods, and ineffective classroom management practices also contribute to the manifestation of violent tendencies (Reyneke, 2020). Furthermore, problems such as children's inability to cope with their emotions constructively and lack of awareness regarding positive emotional regulation strategies are additional factors that contribute to violent behaviour within the school setting (Meyer & Chetty, 2017).

Many children in the participating schools experience these types of problems. Psychosocial services provided by social service professionals can help them to deal with these experiences and learn better ways of coping, and thus become less violent in their interactions with others (Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions, 2018).

The Thari programme provides psychosocial services to children, which include psychosocial support and counselling for children and their families. As noted above, CYCWs mainly do life-space counselling, assessments, containment of more severe cases, group work, and referrals (National Association of Child Care Workers, 2014); while Thari social workers are responsible for counselling, and statutory interventions are handled by external social work agencies with statutory powers. The Thari interventions may have contributed to children being "less angry" and more able to deal with their anger constructively, resulting in less violence and a greater sense of safety in schools.

Awareness-raising and psychoeducation also take place in the Thari programme. Educators receive training in addressing behavioural problems, with the understanding that effective approaches reduce the tensions that can lead to violence (Nelsen et al., 2001). The use of positive discipline strategies not only minimises classroom disruptions but also fosters a sense of safety

among children (Sprick, 2006). However, the present study's feedback indicates that educators may require further training to effectively manage behavioural and discipline issues, particularly since many of these problems may be linked to trauma. Additional psychoeducation is therefore essential for schools to become more trauma-sensitive (Panlilio, 2019). Having full-time social service professionals such as school social workers and CYCWs available to support children in dealing with traumatic events can also enhance school safety. One participant mentioned that awareness-raising has contributed to the decrease in violence and social issues experienced in schools.

It was established that the Stakeholder Forum is mainly responsible for networking and mobilising community resources to improve the psychosocial functioning of children and their parents/caregivers. The Forum helps to ensure that children receive any necessary interventions (e.g., referrals to DSD, clinics, and rehabilitation centres), and that those are delivered more quickly than in the past.

The results make clear that the Thari programme places a high priority on supportive practices for child development. These include safe parks, play activities that improve children's academic and social skills, sports activities, and help with homework; these positively impact children's well-being by providing appropriate supports, assisting development, and offering recreational opportunities. The CYCWs also conduct home visits with the ultimate purpose of creating a positive physical and social environment for children. Based on the feedback CYCWs provide to the school regarding children's home environments, the school and the programme can attend to special needs that the children may have. All of these services help create a safe school environment (Breen et al., 2019; Hawkes, 2021).

Educational activities at the safe parks include providing assistance with homework and engaging in educational games. Games like Scrabble and chess that enhance such skills as reading, writing, planning, and problem-solving are particularly beneficial. These skill improvements are especially crucial in South Africa, where proficiency levels in reading and writing are low. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) indicated that 78% of Grade 4 children in South Africa struggle to read for meaning; even more alarming, South Africa ranked last among the 50 countries participating in the study (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Given this context, the incorporation of educational activities in safe parks can play a significant role in promoting literacy and cognitive development among children. By leveraging games that foster essential skills, the Thari programme aims to contribute to improving educational outcomes for the students and address the pressing issue of low reading and writing proficiency in South Africa.

The study identified poverty and hunger as major threats to well-being in the community. Initially, schools were concerned about bullying and violence, but later shifted focus to seek support for children suffering from hunger. The Thari programme also addressed the issue of

children lacking essential documents like birth certificates. These efforts contributed to creating a safer and more supportive environment for the children.

The study's findings indicate that both educators and CYCWs undergo ongoing capacity-building through psychology-oriented skills training facilitated by social workers and contracted professionals associated with the Thari programme. Ensuring continuous training for staff and other programme supporters is crucial in providing a professional service equipped to address the complex social issues beneficiaries may encounter (see Figure 2).

Educators receive training from the Isibindi programme in handling behavioural problems and gender-based violence, while CYCWs undergo in-service training (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017). The initial training is followed by continuous in-service training covering aspects such as statistics; convening stakeholder meetings and case conferences; the Screening, Identification, Assessment, And Support (SIAS) policy; and the National School Safety Framework, which addresses violence, theft, and vandalism in schools, as well as parenting and basic counselling skills (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2018). Although CYCWs are sufficiently trained to provide basic support services, they are not qualified to offer psychosocial counselling.

Another finding was that the Stakeholder Forum creates linkages with other role-players that provide additional psychosocial services and counselling to the Thari beneficiaries. The ability to refer children to outside organisations is important since the programme lacks full-time social workers to provide some of the more specialised services. Furthermore, some cases are referred for statutory interventions or services outside the programme's jurisdiction. Good working relationships with outside organisations help ensure better services to the programme's beneficiaries.

The quantitative data align with the qualitative findings, highlighting various psychosocial issues that many of the children experience and that contribute to violence in schools. The Thari programme effectively addresses these problems, leading to safer school environments. This positive impact is evident in educators' belief that the problem of gangsterism has decreased (Table 4), and that the CYCWs contribution to this reduction was significant (Table 5).

A significant proportion of educators (53%) and children (80%) now feel safe in schools, indicating a notable improvement compared to the situation 5 years ago. Although these percentages are not yet ideal, the progress is to be welcomed given the challenging circumstances in these schools.

The presence of CYCWs is perceived as a contributing factor to the safety of both children and educators. While the CYCWs are the visible representatives of social services in these schools, it is important to acknowledge that social workers and other professionals also play critical roles in providing services to children in need of care and protection. Overall, the results emphasise a need for social service professionals such as social workers and CYCWs to be present at schools since

they can contribute to creating a safer school environment (Lenhardt et al., 2018; Mabasa & Muluvhu, 2019; Venter & Jeffries, 2020).

**Recommendations**

The study has several implications for the further improvement of the Thari programme. Skills training to improve material security and a sense of self-sufficiency was one of the identified themes, exemplified by the CYCW who introduced basic computer skills training at his school. The programme should consider expanding the services provided at the safe parks to incorporate vocational training for youth.

Another recommendation is to start food gardens at safe parks and schools to support children suffering from hunger. Providing meals at safe parks will deepen the impact of these spaces since children would then be better able to concentrate on their homework and take advantage of the developmental activities.

The schools that participated in this study did not have structured sports programmes, so the Thari programme could fill this gap. The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture should financially support school sports and cultural activities, and the DBE should ensure that these activities are available in every school.

It is further recommended that educators be trained in trauma sensitivity and restorative discipline. This would equip them to identify psychosocial problems and ensure that discipline problems are managed appropriately.

The findings revealed that CYCWs are expected to perform duties they are not trained for, such as very basic psychology-oriented counselling, as there are no full-time social workers in the programme. For this reason, it is recommended that the Thari programme ensure that the services of full-time social workers and psychologists are readily available.

Interventions mentioned by Galappatti (2003), but not included in the themes, are interpersonal skills development for community members, social activities to support the expression of feelings and thoughts, strengthening the spiritual dimension, and providing training on issues such as children's rights, non-violent conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. The Thari programme could consider whether including some of these psychosocial services would be of benefit.

Since the study shows that this programme is effective, it can offer guidelines for other similar initiatives that provide psychosocial services to children in schools and communities. It is recommended that the Thari programme be used as a model to introduce and enhance services for vulnerable children in communities with low socioeconomic status.

### *Limitations of the Study*

The study acknowledges several limitations: non-probability purposeful sampling that restricts generalisability, potential bias due to participant involvement in the programme, and communication challenges during Covid interviews with mask-wearing. As a result, caution is advised when interpreting the context-specific findings. Further research is needed to validate and extend the study's conclusions to a broader context.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the Thari programme demonstrates the valuable contribution of school social workers and CYCWs in providing diverse psychosocial services that significantly contribute to school safety. The findings of this research underscore the importance of fully incorporating social service professionals into mainstream township schools to address the trauma and violence experienced by children in South African educational settings. By doing so, the DBE can effectively promote a safer and more supportive learning environment, thus fostering the well-being and academic success of students.

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