A Proposed Holistic Approach to Management of Psychosocial Hazards in School Environments: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This study reviews articles that synthesize existing research on the management of psychosocial hazards in schools. The study aimed at proposing a holistic approach for promoting a safe school climate through the management of psychosocial hazards. The study reviewed a wide scholarly articles, reports, and studies, including internet sources. This gave a comprehensive analysis of the current state of knowledge in school safety and health management. The review highlights the need for a holistic approach in the management of psychosocial hazards in schools since there is no deliberate approach used to manage these hazards. The study identified psychosocial hazards in schools such as bullying, teacher stress and burn out, peer pressure, and academic pressure among others. The study, therefore, proposed a holistic approach to managing psychosocial hazards by first of all identifying the hazards inherent in the school setting and then apply risk assessment procedures and management.

Keywords: Holistic Approach, Psychosocial Hazards, Schools, Management.


Introduction

Learners and teachers spend most of their time in school environments. Therefore, school environments should be safe and secure. Schools have an additional responsibility for imparting knowledge and for fostering psychological and social well-being of their learners and staff. Initially, schools had a primarily focus on academic achievement. However, the situation now demands a comprehensive approach to address hazards and risks in school environment. Hazards management in schools is important because it keeps learners, teachers, and support staff safe from any harm, while also protecting financial assets and lowering legal liability. Most schools have physical hazards, biological hazards, chemical hazards, ergonomic hazards, and psychosocial hazards. Therefore, one of the hazards that schools have to manage are psychosocial hazards. Psychosocial hazards are those that can impact the mental health and overall welfare of all learners, teachers and support staff in schools (Mubita, 2018; Mubita 2021). Psychosocial hazards include a wide range of factors, such as bullying, stress, discrimination, violence, and inadequate support systems, which can significantly affect the emotional and social development of learners and the well-being of teachers (Hoge et al., 2018; Lloyd et al., 2020; Mubita, 2018). To ensure the holistic well-being of school environments, it is important to adopt a strategy for identifying, managing, and mitigating these psychosocial hazards.

Through a review of research, this study proposed a holistic approach in the management of psychosocial hazards that creates a good school climate. The proposed holistic approach also underscores a concerted
effort among teachers, parents, learners, and mental health professionals in addressing psychosocial hazards (Lester et al., 2019; Mubita, 2018).

**Aim**

The aim of this paper was to propose a holistic approach to management of psychosocial hazards in schools.

**Research Questions**

This paper was guided by the following research questions:

(a) What psychosocial hazards are found in schools?
(b) What is the impact of psychosocial hazards on educational outcomes?
(c) What holistic approach can be used to manage psychosocial hazards in school environments?

**Significance of the Study**

This study focused on addressing the pressing need for a holistic approach to the management of psychosocial hazards in schools. This would contribute significantly to the field of education and psychosocial well-being. A safe and secure school atmosphere for teachers and learners can result in good academic achievement generally. A proposed holistic approach in the management of psychosocial hazards in schools may help school managers develop policies that help curb challenges faced by psychosocial safety and health.

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**Review of Related Literature**

**Psychosocial Hazards in Schools**

Psychosocial hazards in schools are a range of stressors that can negatively impact the mental well-being of learners, teachers, and staff in the school environment. They are mostly related to the psychological and social aspects of the school environment created as people interact. Psychosocial hazards can have significant consequences on learners, teachers, and support staff. Psychosocial hazards inherent in schools are as follows:

**Bullying:** Bullying involves repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm others. Cyberbullying occurs through repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm others through digital means. Tokunaga (2010) defined Cyberbullying as “any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others”. This electronic hostility can disturb learners and teachers and affect their academic performance. This is because bullying can result in significant emotional distress among learners, teachers, and support staff. Due to increase in access to mobile phones and computers in most schools, cyberbullying has become a common problem among school-going children as these gadgets are sometimes abused (Chirwa and Mubita, 2021).

**Academic Pressure:** Demand to perform well in academics presents some form of pressure among teachers and learners. This is called academic pressure. Academic pressure includes the pressure placed on learners by parents and pressure placed on teachers by the community. When academic performance fails to satisfy parents, it may affect family relations, resulting in parent–child conflict, which may lead to an increase in adolescents' problem behavior (Huan et al., 2008). According to Campbell & Svenson, (1992) and Mubita, (2018) learners’ health and academic performance can be negatively affected because of higher degree of stress.

**Teacher Stress and Burnout:** Teachers usually are faced with a lot of expectations in schools. They face challenges like over enrollment, challenging behaviors of learners and the local community, and administrative pressures. All these can lead to stress and burnout. The National Education Association (2022) defines teacher burnout as “a condition in which an educator has exhausted the personal and
professional resources necessary to do the job.” It’s not just about the ability to educate effectively, though. Teacher burnout can have long-term physical and emotional repercussions, so it is important to recognize the signs and symptoms of this all-too-common condition to protect your mental and physical health (Karbowski, 2022).

Peer Pressure: Adolescents in schools often face peer pressure to conform to certain behaviors or social norms, which can lead to stress and emotional turmoil. Peer influence is when you choose to do something you wouldn’t otherwise do, because you want to feel accepted and valued by your friends. Peer pressure is the direct or indirect influence on peers, i.e., members of social groups with similar interests, experiences, or social statuses. Members of a peer group are more likely to influence a person’s beliefs, values, and behavior. According to Marquis, Christopher; Tilcsik, András, (2016) group or individual learners may be encouraged and want to follow their peers by changing their attitudes, values or behaviors to conform to those of the influencing group or individual. For the individual affected by peer pressure, this can have both a positive or negative effect on them education wise.

Social Isolation and Loneliness: Favotto et al. (2019) reviewed the current definitions of loneliness and summarize loneliness as “the feeling that results from the absence of a social life that one desires, including a perceived discrepancy between the social contacts one has in relation to what they crave, an increase in their need for social connection that is not met, or a subjective feeling of isolation regardless of surrounding social opportunities” (2019, p. 1). Adolescence can be a time of social transition, and feelings of isolation and loneliness can be prevalent among secondary school learners. Loneliness is the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact. Social isolation is a lack of social connections. Social isolation can lead to loneliness in some people, while others can feel lonely without being socially isolated. Studies describe how loneliness becomes more prevalent during the adolescent years and why that is the case. Loneliness is associated with poor academic outcomes and poor health behaviors that impact learning or turn learners away from education. Evidence suggests that creating positive social classroom environments, where teacher and classmate support are available, is crucial in combatting youth loneliness.

Addressing these psychosocial hazards in schools is essential to creating a supportive and healthy learning environment. Strategies may include implementing anti-bullying programs, providing mental health support, and promoting a balanced approach to academics and extracurricular activities.

Selected Studies on the Impact Psychosocial Hazards on Educational Outcomes

a) Felitti, V. J., & Anda, R. F. (2010). The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders, and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare. This landmark ACEs study found a strong correlation between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, and negative educational outcomes. Individuals with a higher number of ACEs were more likely to have lower academic achievement and increased risk of school dropout. Felitti and Anda (2010) demonstrated a significant association between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and adverse educational outcomes, including lower academic achievement and increased risk of dropping out.

b) Bradshaw, C. P., Waasdorp, T. E., & Johnson, S. L. (2015). Overlapping verbal, relational, and physical bullying and victimization: Association with psychosocial and school adjustment. This study highlighted the negative impact of overlapping forms of bullying (verbal, relational, and physical) on psychosocial well-being and school adjustment. According to the study, learners who experienced multiple types of bullying were more likely to show adverse educational outcomes, including lower academic performance. Bradshaw et al. (2015) found that learners experiencing multiple forms of bullying were at greater risk for adverse educational outcomes, including lower academic performance.

While not focused solely on education, this study highlighted the importance of considering material hardship and poverty as psychosocial hazards that can affect children's development, including their educational outcomes. It found that material hardship was a significant factor influencing child development. Gershoff et al. (2007) emphasized the impact of material hardship on child development, which includes educational outcomes.

d) Deepa M, Priya, K. (2020) Impact of Social Media on Mental Health of Learners

A descriptive study was conducted on two (2) universities in Chennai with a sample of 90 participants. The study included questions on demographical information, the pattern of social networking usage, social relationship and health effects. The study was conducted to examine the impact of social media on student’s mental health issues. The study revealed that majority of the respondents use a number of social networking sites and they are spending time more than four hours in a day for using social networking sites. In this study it was found that there was a difference between number of social networking sites and symptoms of depression. In addition the study revealed that there is a strong relationship between symptoms of anxiety and depression. The results of this study further reviewed that there was a relationship between feeling anxious and serious active on social networking sites than in real life. As a result, the more usage of social media, number of social networking sites and too much of time spent on social networking sites is affecting the learners mental health such as depression and anxiety.

Methodology

The study used the following procedures:

- There was an exhaustive search of academic databases, journals, and grey literature to identify relevant studies on psychosocial hazards in schools.
- Studies were included if they focused on psychosocial hazards within school environments, discussed management strategies, and provided empirical evidence.
- Data from selected articles and studies were extracted and categorized to identify recurring themes, strategies, and challenges related to the management of psychosocial hazards.
- Thematic and content analysis was used to organize, synthesize and interpret the findings.

Psychosocial Hazards in School Environments

Psychosocial hazards in schools refer to various stressors and challenges that can negatively impact the psychological and social well-being of learners, teachers, and other staff members within a school environment. Learners’ social and emotional experiences influence learning processes and in turn affect learning outcomes (UNESCO MGIEP, 2020). Schools that prioritize learners’ well-being have a higher chance of improving their academic achievements (UNESCO Office Bangkok, 2017). Some common psychosocial hazards in schools environments are as follows:

- **Bullying and Harassment**: Bullying and harassment, whether physical or verbal, can create a hostile and emotionally damaging atmosphere for learners and staff. It can lead to anxiety, depression, and even physical health issues.
- **Academic Pressure**: Excessive academic expectations, such as high-stakes testing and demanding coursework, can lead to stress and anxiety among learners. Teachers may also experience stress due to pressure to meet standardized testing goals.
- **Teacher Burnout**: Teachers often face heavy workloads, classroom management challenges, and lack of resources. This can lead to burnout, resulting in decreased job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and a higher likelihood of leaving the profession.
• **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment**: With the proliferation of digital devices and social media, cyberbullying and online harassment have become significant concerns in schools. These online threats can negatively affect learners' mental health and social relationships. The prevalence of school violence (physical, psychological, and sexual), as well as bullying both in-person and online, is a key obstacle to a positive psychosocial school environment (UNESCO, 2017).

• **Inadequate Support Services**: Schools may lack sufficient resources to provide counseling, special education services, and support for learners with mental health issues or learning disabilities. This can exacerbate the psychosocial hazards learners face.

• **Discrimination and Stereotyping**: Discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other factors can create a hostile environment and negatively impact learners' self-esteem and mental health.

• **Teacher-Student Relationships**: The quality of teacher-student relationships can greatly influence a student's emotional well-being and academic success. Poor teacher-student relationships can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation.

• **Peer Pressure and Social Isolation**: Learners often face peer pressure to conform to certain norms or engage in risky behaviors. Social isolation can also lead to feelings of loneliness and depression.

• **Violence and Safety Concerns**: The presence of violence or concerns about safety in schools can create an environment of fear and anxiety among learners and staff members.

• **Family Issues**: Family-related stressors, such as parental divorce, financial instability, or domestic violence, can spill over into the school environment and impact a student's emotional well-being and academic performance.

Addressing psychosocial hazards in schools requires a comprehensive approach involving school administrators, teachers, parents, and learners. This may include implementing anti-bullying programs, providing mental health support services, fostering inclusive and supportive school climates, and offering professional development opportunities for teachers to cope with stress and prevent burnout. Creating a safe and nurturing school environment is essential for promoting the well-being of all individuals within the school community.

### Impact of Psychosocial Hazards on Educational Outcomes

Psychosocial hazards can have a significant impact on educational outcomes, affecting both learners and teachers. These hazards encompass a wide range of factors related to the social and psychological aspects of the learning environment. A positive psychosocial school environment helps to create a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning. It relates to ‘the dynamic relationship between psychological aspects of our experience (our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors) and our wider social experience (our relationships, family and community networks, social values, and cultural practices)’ (INEE, 2016: 8). Some key points on the impact of psychosocial hazards on educational outcomes:

According to this study, psychosocial hazards such as bullying, harassment, and discrimination can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression among learners and teachers, ultimately affecting their ability to focus on learning or teaching. This was also noted by Denny, et al., (2016) and Twemlow, et al., (2005) who found out that psychosocial hazards such as bullying, harassment, and discrimination can lead to stress and anxiety among other things.

A positive classroom climate is essential for effective learning. Negative psychosocial factors like a lack of teacher support, poor peer relationships, and a hostile classroom environment can hinder student engagement and motivation (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Roeser, et al., 1996).
Teachers are not immune to the impact of psychosocial hazards. High levels of stress, excessive workload, and lack of support can contribute to teacher burnout, which can negatively affect the quality of instruction (Hakanen, et al., 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Learners exposed to psychosocial hazards are at greater risk of lower academic achievement. Frequent disruptions, bullying, or discrimination can lead to decreased concentration, absenteeism, and lower grades (Bradshaw, et al., 2010; Nansel, et al., 2001; Muyabi et. al. 2022).

Persistent exposure to psychosocial hazards can contribute to increased dropout rates and leaner absenteeism (Muyabi et. al. 2022). Learners who feel socially isolated or unsupported are more likely to disengage from school and drop out (Jimerson, et al., 2003; Van Ryzin, et al., 2009; Muyabi et. al. 2022).

The study noted that the impact of psychosocial hazards can extend beyond the immediate educational setting. Learners who experience chronic stressors in school may face long-term consequences such as reduced career prospects and compromised mental health (Hawkins, et al., 2000; Marmot, 2004).

**Proposed Holistic Approach to Management of Psychosocial Hazards in Schools**

Key findings lead us to the following proposed holistic approach to management of psychosocial hazards in schools:

1. **Hazard identification:** The first step involves the identification of psychosocial hazards within the school environment. This includes factors such as bullying, academic pressure, peer relationships, teacher-student dynamics, and socioeconomic stressors. Comprehensive assessments allow for a better understanding of the unique challenges faced by each school. There is need for teachers and administration to be engaged in research to identify psychosocial hazards in their schools and make meaningful decisions (Lako and Mubita, 2021).

2. **Evaluate the risks:** Evaluate the risks associated with each identified psychosocial hazard in the school environment. This will help management find sustainable solutions to each type of psychosocial hazard identified.

3. **Preventive Measures:** After evaluating risks to identified psychosocial hazards, preventive measures, including awareness campaigns, training programs, and the establishment of clear policies and procedures have to be put in place. Prevention is a cost-effective and efficient way to reduce the occurrence and impact of psychosocial hazards in school environments.

4. **Stakeholder collaboration and engagement:** Successful management of psychosocial hazards in school environments necessitates the involvement of all stakeholders, including learners, parents, teachers, school administrators, and support staff. Collaboration fosters a sense of shared responsibility and allows for diverse perspectives to inform hazard mitigation strategies.

5. **Mental Health Support:** Schools should provide accessible and stigma-free mental health support services. Training teachers and staff in recognizing early signs of mental health issues is crucial for early intervention and support.

6. **Inclusive and Supportive Environment:** Creating an inclusive and supportive school environment is essential for mitigating psychosocial hazards. This includes promoting empathy, tolerance, and diversity, as well as implementing strategies to reduce discrimination and social exclusion.

7. **Education and Life Skills:** Incorporating psychosocial education into the curriculum equips learners with essential life skills such as emotional intelligence, stress management, and conflict resolution. These skills empower learners to navigate psychosocial hazards effectively.

8. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the psychosocial hazard management plan ensure its effectiveness. Feedback from stakeholders helps refine strategies and adapt to evolving challenges.
m) **Crisis preparedness**: Preparedness for crisis situations, such as incidents of bullying or distress, is integral. There is need to outline procedures for swift intervention, offering timely support and guidance to those affected learners, teachers or other staff.

n) **Research-driven decision-making**: Ongoing research into the psychosocial well-being of the school community informs evidence-based decision-making. Data collection and analysis enable schools to tailor interventions to specific needs.

o) **Policy Advocacy**: Advocating for policies and regulations that promote psychosocial hazard management in schools at the district, state, and national levels is crucial for long-term sustainability and widespread adoption.

**Conclusion**

Effective management of psychosocial hazards in schools is imperative for creating a safe and conducive learning environment. This article underscores the significance of recognizing and addressing psychosocial hazards such as bullying, stress, and mental health issues among learners and staff. By implementing proactive measures like awareness campaigns, counseling services, and staff training, schools can foster emotional well-being and promote a positive school culture. It is crucial for teachers, administrators, and policymakers to collaborate and prioritize the management of psychosocial hazards to ensure the holistic development and success of learners in today’s educational settings.

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