Psychosocial support is not a luxury: every learner deserves the support to thrive

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When we speak about education, we often speak about textbooks, teachers, classrooms, school infrastructure and the quality of teaching and learning. We measure how well learners are doing through their academic performance, the marks they achieve and whether they progress to the next grade. However, there is something equally important that we do not speak about enough, which is the emotional, psychological and social wellbeing of learners.

Learners are children before they are learners, and their vulnerabilities must be recognised and protected. Learners exist in violent and gruesome communities. We come to school carrying different experiences, challenges and circumstances. Some of us are dealing with problems at home, grief, violence, bullying, anxiety, depression, peer pressure and other difficulties that affect how we experience the world. These challenges do not disappear when we walk through the school gates. They follow us into our classrooms, influence our relationships and sometimes make it difficult for us to concentrate, participate and learn.

This is why psychosocial support matters.

To me, psychosocial support means having access to things like counselling and social workers and anything that will help me and other learners receive the necessary assistance we need to have a holistic mind. It means helping us deal with life while also striving as learners and maintaining balance in all aspects of our lives.

This is important because being a learner is about more than completing schoolwork and passing examinations. We are also growing, discovering ourselves, navigating relationships and trying to understand the world around us. Sometimes, we need someone to listen to us, guide us and help us make sense of what we are going through.

We cannot be expected to succeed academically when our emotional and psychological needs are ignored.

Yet, access to psychosocial support remains something that many learners cannot easily obtain. Not every school has a counsellor, psychologist or social worker who is readily available to assist learners. In many instances, learners are expected to approach teachers

who are already responsible for teaching and managing large classrooms. While teachers play an important role in identifying learners who may need assistance, they cannot be expected to carry the responsibility of providing every form of psychological and social support.

We need a more holistic approach to learner wellbeing.

Every school should have access to qualified psychosocial support professionals, including psychologists and social workers, who can provide appropriate assistance to learners. Where having a professional permanently based at every school is not immediately possible, the government must establish accessible and adequately resourced support systems that ensure no learner is left without help.

We also need schools to become spaces where learners feel safe enough to speak about their challenges without fear of judgement, discrimination or being dismissed. There should be clear processes for identifying learners who need support, referring them to appropriate professionals and ensuring that they receive the assistance they need.

Importantly, psychosocial support should not only be available when a learner reaches a crisis point. It should also include preventative interventions, guidance, emotional development and ongoing support. We should not have to reach breaking point before someone recognises that we need help.

The right to education must mean more than simply having access to a school and sitting in a classroom. It must also mean creating the conditions in which learners can participate meaningfully in education, develop their potential and experience school as a place where their wellbeing matters.

The government, particularly the Department of Basic Education and provincial education departments, must take greater responsibility for ensuring that psychosocial support is accessible in schools. This requires dedicated resources, qualified personnel, clear policies and proper monitoring to ensure that commitments translate into actual support for learners.

Parents, teachers, school governing bodies and communities also have a role to play. However, the responsibility cannot be shifted onto learners themselves to find help when the systems meant to support them are absent or inaccessible.

We are not asking for special treatment. We are asking for the support necessary to learn, grow and live healthy lives.

Psychosocial support should not be treated as an additional service that schools provide when resources allow. It must be recognised as an essential part of creating an education system that cares about the whole learner.

Our education should not only prepare us for examinations and the world of work. It should also recognise our psychosocial support needs. Every child in South Africa should have access to psychosocial support.

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