Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown on the psychosocial functioning of school going adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The psychosocial functioning of school-going adolescents is crucial for their overall growth and holistic development. Research has shown that healthy psychosocial development fosters essential life skills, enabling individuals to engage meaningfully with their environment, families, peers, and communities, supporting healthy functionality and mental resilience. However, the Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic and subsequent lockdown had profound negative effects on adolescents' psychosocial functioning as restrictions created isolation and disconnection from their social networks. Using the Ubuntu lens, an indigenous social work approach, the qualitative study assessed the psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 lockdown through in-depth interviews with the participants. Data were collected from Grage 9 learners, in a high-density suburb in Gauteng province, South Africa. The participants were purposefully selected, and the data was analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that lockdown restrictions significantly impacted adolescents' psychosocial functioning adversely. The lack of social connections and human connectedness attributed to lockdown restrictions led to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety and adversely impacted the adolescents' normal psychosocial functioning. The South African adolescents also experienced feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, fear and being overwhelmed throughout the lockdown. The combination of pandemic induced social vulnerabilities and limited access to adequate support left some participants struggling to cope. The study concluded by highlighting the need for targeted, innovative social work interventions and strategies responsive to pandemic situations. These are essential to mitigate the possible long-term impacts of the pandemic lockdown on the psychosocial functioning and mental health of school-going adolescents.

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INTRODUCTION

A person's capacity to carry out everyday tasks, engage in satisfying interactions with others and to meet the needs of the community in which they are living, is reflected in their psychosocial functioning. A variety of factors (interaction with family, peers, social support) come into play in the development of a healthy psychosocial functioning of school-going adolescents, disruptions have the potential of impacting the overall functioning and development of the child and might have long-term adverse implications (Ro & Clark, 2009). The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and lockdown are some of the disruptors which have shown to impact adversely on the psychosocial functioning of school-going adolescents. COVID-19 has been defined as a communicable respiratory disease caused by a strain of coronavirus that causes illness in humans (WHO, 2021), in South Africa, the first case was reported in March 2021. This study was carried out in 2023 to retrospectively explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on the psychosocial functioning of school-going adolescents, a key aspect of their ability to perform daily tasks and interact meaningfully within their communities. This is mainly because of the restrictions that were imposed leading to an unprecedented way of life with limited interactions with various systems of an individual such as family, friends, school, religion and community. Adolescents are in a developmental stage where their self-concept and growth depend on interactions with significant others such as school peers, friends, family and community members. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown limited that interconnectedness fostering individualism that contrasts with the collective values of Ubuntu. This paper therefore sought to utilize the indigenous knowledge systems of Ubuntu lens to assess and showcase the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on the psychosocial functioning of school-going adolescents. Understanding the effects is crucial in development of interventions to address/mitigate these in school social work practice to prevent long-term adverse implications.

BACKGROUND

Psychosocial functioning is defined as an individual's ability to engage in daily activities, such as getting along with others and building connections (Ro & Clark, 2009). For adolescents, who are at a crucial developmental stage, healthy psychosocial functioning is fostered through interpersonal and social relationships, well-being, basic functioning, and self-mastery (Ro & Clark, 2009). They argue that psychosocial functioning of adolescents depends on engagement with others, which promotes well-being and overall life functionality. This suggests that for this group of individuals to develop healthy psychosocial functioning, interactions and interconnectedness with peers, family, friends and society are key. This is also in alignment with the concept of Ubuntu, a key African theory, which emphasizes compassion, reciprocity, dignity, and humanity in building communities (Khoza, 2006). In South African townships, Ubuntu influences family and community interactions, stressing togetherness, harmonious living, and mutual support. For adolescents, thriving and psychosocial functionality is deeply rooted in these connections and interactions. This is further supported by Chigangaidze (2022) who states that the African philosophy of Ubuntu advances the enhancement of psychosocial functioning and promotes pleasant emotions through good human interactions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown disrupted these interactions, potentially impacting the psychosocial functioning of school-going adolescents. An adverse impact to the psychosocial functioning of a school-going adolescent has the potential of long-term overall functioning of the affected individual, impairs their mental well-being, relationships with significant others and learning (Jansen, 2020).

While studies on the psychosocial impact of COVID-19 have primarily focused on adults, little research has addressed adolescents as a distinct, developing population. The South African context, particularly the role of Ubuntu in psychosocial functioning, is also understudied, creating a research and knowledge gap. Haine *et al.,* (2025) supports this and state that global research on adolescent mental health and overall psychosocial functioning during the pandemic is extensive, studies specific to the South African context remain limited. Hence there is a need to carry out such research. Kagola and Abur (2023) assert that psychosocial functioning is prominent to human beings, and it is inherently connected to physical health, therefore young people from an African heritage are encouraged to leverage Ubuntu values and principles as their cultural safety and strengths in dealing with mental health and psychosocial wellbeing issues. Given that, social workers have a mandate to ensure general overall well-being of learners in a school setting, thus interventions must be undergirded by African approaches. The study therefore seeks to fill this gap by assessing the effects of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown to develop appropriate interventions (if needed) to mitigate these impacts and prepare for any future upset and help the child develop some form of resilience to pandemics such as COVID-19 and cope well under any circumstances.

The psychosocial functioning, development, and growth of adolescents are important. At this phase in their development, adolescents combine abstract thoughts, become more adept at taking in other points of view, become more capable of introspection, and start to form their sense of self. This is when a supportive environment is most

helpful, COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown unfortunately affected the possibility of such an environment being available to adolescents. The impact has been evidenced in studies such as one by Gittings *et al.,* (2021) where psychosocial functioning, personal development and growth of adolescents were adversely affected, most likely due to COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Manzar *et al.,* (2021) also shared similar findings in their study and described effects such as social disintegration, loneliness, interruption of social life, relationships and bereavement. Whilst Maree (2021) indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown brought confusion to school-going adolescents, the absence of their usual support system such as peers and consistent lifestyle of going to school, may have left them feeling overwhelmed, overburdened, stressed, and anxious which may have interfered with their psychological functioning. The interruptions had an impact on their usual environment as individualism was advocated for as a strategy to keep them safe. This meant limited interactions with school, family, community and most importantly, their peers who form an important aspect for their development at this stage.

These restrictions might have meant well in terms of protecting adolescents and society from being infected with COVID-19, however they seem to have had unintended consequences in the form of poor psychosocial functioning of adolescents. Lockdown required that individuals stay at home, suspended schooling and this implied that they were exposed to various home situations and were compelled to remain there without a way out. For example, South Africa has one of the worst rates of domestic violence in the world and adolescents experience interpersonal violence at rates that are 8 and 5 times greater than the worldwide norm (Maphosa, 2022). Being stuck at home for some of these adolescents meant being further exposed to domestic violence, abuse and unfavorable living conditions, as the school would normally have served as a haven for them to escape these situations (Spaull*, et al.*, 2020). Munoz-Fernandez and Rodriguez-Meirinhos (2021) also stipulated that adolescents who were already experiencing adverse living conditions, such as poverty and exposure to domestic violence, were further subjected to high levels of emotional distress, anxiety which impacted their normal psychosocial functioning. Hearing the voices of South African school-going adolescents is important to contribute to literature and knowledge in the African context. These are also worthwhile to develop effective tailor-made interventions suitable for the African adolescent. Given that, studies of this nature are paramount to fully understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on the psychosocial functioning of school-going adolescents and mitigate the effects.

THEORETICAL LENS

Khomba (2022) states that by nature, humans are social beings, and their wants and capacities are largely a result of society and its institutions. For one to exhibit fully rounded characteristics and effective human behavior, they have to experience a web of relationships with groups, organisations, family, church and peers. The COVID-19 pandemic was distressing for many, especially given the fact that there were restrictions imposed on human interactions with each other, thus affecting social and communal life. However, these restrictions went against the fiber of who we are as African people, as they encouraged individualism, isolation and limited human contact. Ubuntu theory is selected and deemed appropriate for this study as a philosophical framework for African social work. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) argue that use of European theories by social workers fosters the promotion of individualism and western ways of addressing African problems, diminishes their strength. The psychosocial functioning effects will be felt by school-going adolescents for years to come, thus adversely impacting on the various systems in their lives such as family, peers and community at large especially given the types of societies our African communities are as they embrace collectivisms and shun individualism. Understanding and addressing the implications therefore needs African solutions appropriate for the African communities these school-going adolescents belong to. Ubuntu, as a philosophical framework rooted in African traditions offers a viable, culturally relevant approach to addressing African challenges (Adesehinwa, Aderoju, & Olutoyin, 2025). As an African community, the traditional heritage in many places reflects a cultural norm of working together, exhibiting humanity and helping one another in times of adversity and even prosperity (Khomba, 2022). Mugumbate *et al.,* (2023) are in support and state that an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world. Therefore, looking at the adolescent issues in isolation and neglecting the very same community, peers and family they would need in mitigating these effects would not be commendable hence the adoption of Ubuntu as a relevant theory for this study.

METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative in nature given the importance of hearing voices of the affected school-going adolescents. The aim was to understand their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown and how this affected their psychosocial functioning. The study hence adopted elements of a phenomenological approach as a type of qualitative enquiry because it emphasized the lived aspects, viewpoints and experiences at the moment they occur (Bryne, 2001). Rather than assuming and drawing judgments about experiences based on

preconceptions, the phenomenological design aims to understand how experiences occurred, in this case, it was important to establish how the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown affected the psychosocial functioning of adolescents, particularly for a South African context. The population for the study was an entire Grade 9 cohort from a particular school based in Soweto, South Africa. The Grade 9 learners were considered suitable for the study as they missed out on school for a period of 6 to 7 months in the year 2020 and 2021 combined. That is a prolonged period with no schooling, association with peers and communities, this was also compounded by the fact that they were in their first year of high school (Grade 8) when the pandemic hit and could not make full transition and adjustment from primary to high school. Purposive sampling was therefore used to get ten research participants of both genders aged between 14 and 17 years, all of a black race. The inclusion criteria were 1) school-going adolescent 2) Grade 8 learner (non-repeating) at onset of COVID 19 pandemic 3) parental consent given 4) assent provided by adolescents. Data was collected using a semi structured interview schedule after consent was received from participants parents/guardians and assent received from the learners. The interviews were also audio recorded, and data analyses using thematic procedures. For thematic data analysis, the 6 steps from Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed and these included 1) familiarizing self with data 2) generating initial codes 3) searching for themes 4) reviewing themes 5) defining and naming themes and lastly 6) producing the report.

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the University of Johannesburg's Research Ethics Committee (REC:01-205-2021). Since the research was carried out in schools with high school learners, permission had to be initially sought from the Department of Basic Education and School Governing Body (SGB). The study ensured that consent was obtained from the participants' guardians/parents before seeking the assent of the minors since they were under 18 years of age. Ethical considerations included but were not limited to; the right to withdraw from the study anytime, protection of participant details through use of pseudonyms, maintenance of privacy and confidentiality and written informed consent.

FINDINGS

Findings from the ten school-going adolescents are presented below in a thematic framework. The adolescents shared their COVID-19 pandemic lockdown experiences and how they affected their psychosocial functioning. The psychosocial functioning effects data will be presented in 5 themes namely, academic disruptions, mental health issues, support structures available to adolescents, pandemic induced socioeconomic vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms they utilized during this challenging period.

Psychosocial functioning effects

Academic disruptions

Research participants reported that they missed almost seven months of schooling thus it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the education and learning of adolescents. This led to learners experiencing academic stress amongst other challenges they grappled with by staying at home including social isolation. School is a significant part of an adolescent's life as they spend most of their time in that kind of setting. With the onset of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns, these adolescents were not afforded that opportunity thus causing an anomaly in their life. Adolescents are almost always shaped, socialized and groomed within the school environment because it is there that they mature, acquire character traits, and establish interpersonal connections (Jensen & McKerrow, 2021). All the participants stated that they found it difficult to stay at home, not attend school and receive education, and be without their friends. Some of their views are shared below.

> **Sjava**- *"Am very stressed, frustrated and don't like not going to school, school distracts and redirects my thoughts from the problems which I am facing"*
> **Tbose**- *"I have been feeling empty, at least at school LO and NS is teaching us about careers and life it gives you more to talk to my parents about what am I going to do in the future, with no school l could not relate to my parents and felt like l was wasting my life away"*
> **Boitumelo**- *"Yes, Uhm, I think it helps me because you are in a new space, new environment and you are surrounded by new people so if I have a problem, I can speak to one of my teachers and I am comfortable with speaking with any of my teachers"*
> **Lebo-** *"I feel like l am losing a lot by just staying at home doing nothing, l had a lot going on whilst going to school. I never thought l would say this, but l really miss school, my teachers and friends'*

Regular school attendance is therefore deemed essential for the optimal functioning of adolescents.

Mental health issues

A few participants reported that the COVID-19 lockdown period was traumatic and not pleasant for them. There were some who indicated that they suffered from mental health issues as a result, these included high anxiety levels, high stress levels, and depression. The participants stated that these were triggered by lockdown as they had no prior experiences of these mental health challenges prior COVID-19. These effects were reported in other studies such as Duby et al., (2022) where they found that South African adolescent girls and young women reported increased stress and anxiety levels, these mental health risks and stressors were attributed to COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. The school-going adolescents who partook in the study reported challenges with mental health issues as indicated in the conversation below.

> **Thabang**: *"I literally felt like l was losing my mind, l was very stressed and anxious most of the time. Staying at home 24/7affected me because I was not allowed to go out to play in the streets, I couldn't go out and see my friends and I also couldn't go and play soccer or even go to school. What kind of life is that? Loneliness galore"*
> **Sjava:** "*Being uncertain of the future was unpleasant, it evoked feelings of fear and so much anxiety, l struggled to even sleep, yikes"*
> **Lulu:** *"Uhm, like I didn't, to be honest with you I didn't like staying at home because you didn't have that time to go outside and stay indoors, it's like it is so horrible, stressful and it is so boring, and nobody likes to stay indoors and not see their friend. I cried most of the time, I could barely eat or sleep. My emotional state was a mess, eventually l was told l suffered mild depression by a Dr after my parents took me to consult".*
> **Msibi:** *"For the very first time in my life, l experienced an emotional breakdown during COVID. I was literally going mad and was so overwhelmed, my brain couldn't cope".*

The Ubuntu philosophy puts an emphasis on social relationships as crucial since it is through the spirit of togetherness that one can grow. In our African societies, human survival is dependent upon other human beings, with COVID-19 and lockdown, this proved a challenge leading to several mental health challenges.

Pandemic induced socioeconomic vulnerabilities

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated socioeconomic vulnerabilities for most research participants. Most of the adolescents were from a local township populated by mostly black people. South Africa's legacy of apartheid includes high levels of inequality with mostly black people suffering the brunt of poverty. Due to COVID-19 these were worsened and adolescents grossly suffered, and their psychosocial functioning adversely impacted as a result. In contexts where poverty and mental health stressors already interact to negatively impact the most vulnerable populations, COVID-19 is likely to have worsened these impacts (Duby *et al.*, 2022), this was evident in this study. Various socioeconomic vulnerabilities such as household unemployment, food insecurity and high rates of domestic violence were reported by adolescents.

> **Melie**- "My *mother, the only breadwinner at home, lost her job during this time, we could barely afford bread during COVID-19. I hated that period with all my heart"*
> **Boitumelo**- "My *father was stopped from going to work and his pay significantly reduced, he became an angry man, constantly fighting with my mother for no reason, we had to tip toe around him"*
> **Bayanda**- "Finances *were bad at home during this time; my mother couldn't go to the piece jobs she does for us to survive. The struggle was real and very stressful"*

These enhanced socioeconomic vulnerabilities such as financial and food insecurity took a toll on the participants general well-being, being socially isolated did not seem to help matters as well as it meant diminished access to opportunities to improve their circumstances.

Support structures

Research participants reported that they lacked access to adequate support structures during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. These included friends and teachers at school, families, religion, community resources such as social work service providers. The adolescents stated that their friends and teachers and school always served as a great support structure in their lives, they would go to church for spiritual upliftment whenever in need of support prior to COVID-19. Some participants stated that they wished for counselling services as they struggled during lockdown. However, these were not available to them as they were not considered essential services during hard lockdown. Participants said:

> **Lebo:** *"I felt alone, had no one to support me throughout the difficult period of my life. There was no help nearby and l felt a sense of hopelessness with the situation".*
> **Boitumelo***: "There was no winning with COVID 19-lockdown, no wonder some people committed suicide, the time was too stressful, and we had no support. I really missed school and at least just going to church with my family"*
> **Thabang***: "I needed my buddies, just missed hanging out with them as it always made me feel good and human"*
> **Lulu:** *"I was diagnosed with depression, unfortunately my parents couldn't afford counselling sessions, l settled for free sessions online which sometimes l couldn't attend as l had no data"*

Adolescents acquire adequate support and rely on their networks of assistance, especially when faced with life challenges and encounter difficulties to cope better and increase their resilience (Addy *et al.,* 2021).

Coping mechanisms of school-going adolescents

The study necessitated exploring and understanding the coping mechanisms they utilized during the hard lockdown, withstanding the fact that they had limited support structures as indicated above. What is evident is that most of the participants struggled with the new 'normal' which meant no school, no friends, limited support, uncertainty and high stress levels. Given the circumstances, they had to find ways of adjusting to the new way of life through coping with mechanisms. About 40% of the participants stated that they could not cope at all as evidenced by these statements:

> **Bayanda**: *"I couldn't cope at all; I ended up finding solace in smoking zol to be sane"*
> **Melie:** *"I did not cope because I was not able to go to school and distress with my friends, it was overwhelming for me"*
> **Magwaza:** "*I didn't know how to function; l didn't know what to do. I didn't cope very well because not seeing my friends was like "I will not see them for 5 years, yet it was 4-7 months". "I had no data for social media and resorted to stealing my dad's alcohol sometimes".*

Interestingly, many adolescents (60%) used healthier coping mechanisms to deal with adversity. These included online chats with friends, playing with siblings, streaming movies and series on streaming platforms to keep busy. Some participants also stated that they remained steadfast in prayer as they lived with uncertainty.

> **Boitumelo:** *"I was able to just stay indoors and be able to just play with my siblings, this helped to deal better with the situation"*
> **Lulu:** *"My mother would keep me busy and like, tell me stories and maybe we could play something at home. But sometimes I would think if I was outside playing with my friends, it was going to be much better."*
> **Lebo:** *"I was understanding to a certain extent but I, I would normally talk to my friends over the phone"*
> **Sjava:** "*Lockdown made me a prayer warrior, kkk, yey, l prayed like Moses*"

The above is evidence of the fact that humans require collective coping methods to minimize harm because people will always confront difficulties, tragedies, and losses in life.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the study suggest that the school-going adolescents experienced adverse psychosocial effects from the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. These included academic disruptions which denied them educational and social interactions with their teachers and school peers, an anomaly in the lives of adolescents. The ethos of Ubuntu is heavily modeled in educational settings. Nxumalo and Mncube (2018) state that students learn how to coexist as human beings, encourage one another, and create friendships in the classroom/in a school setting as they spend much of their time there. However, with COVID-19 lockdown, this was not feasible thus impacting on their general overall well-being and psychosocial functioning adversely. The school disruption effects were further compounded by mental health challenges, reported to be induced from the COVID-19 lockdown.

High levels of stress, anxiety and depression were reported as some of the negative impacts on adolescent mental health. This was captured and described as feelings of emptiness, lack of community and hopelessness for

some adolescents. These findings align with previous research such as Maree (2021) and Munoz-Fernandez and Rodriguez-Meirinhos (2021) on the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on adolescents where participants were also subjected to high levels of emotional distress and anxiety and struggled to function normally psychosocially due to COVID-19. Feelings expressed in this study included helplessness, fear, hopelessness, uncertainty and loneliness. Addy *et al.,* (2021) and Haine e*t al.,* (2025) also found similar results with South African adolescents who experienced dual stresses of the pandemic which were academic and emotional, these were also exacerbated by loneliness.

Whilst the study by Duby *et al.,* (2022) found evidence that due to physical, social, and economic restrictions, South Africans including adolescents with and without existing mental health issues faced heightened levels of loneliness, depression, harmful substance use, and suicidal behaviour. These feelings signify disruptions to an individual's psychosocial functioning and were attributed to the lockdown in this study. It is quite evident that a sense of community (gained in school settings) is paramount for the normal psychosocial functioning of adolescents. This is also supported by Spaull and Van der Berg, (2020) who stated that adolescents gain from having positive social ties with their peers, family, and friends since it lowers anxiety and depression, increases self-esteem, and improves their general well-being.

Mankowitz (2018) argues adolescents benefit from the South African ideology of Ubuntu because it instills in them values of kindness, unity, and togetherness. Additionally, adolescents develop a feeling of self and belonging through their social interactions (Setlhodi, 2019). The fact that they struggled with mental health challenges attributed to the lockdown and had limited support structures is evidence that their experiences limited their abilities to strive without people and activities that are deemed important and crucial to their psychosocial function such as peers. Ngwenya, Chikwari, Seeley, and Ferrand, (2023) also argue that adolescents can share and recover from toxicity they may encounter at home or school with their friends through the spirit of Ubuntu and interactions. This was unfortunately not available for adolescents during the COVID-19 lockdown hence impacting on their psychosocial functioning and mental wellbeing.

The poor development of healthy psychosocial functioning was further exacerbated by lack of access to adequate support such as formal counselling in dealing with the negative effects of the pandemic and lockdown as the findings suggest. Some participants struggled to employ healthy coping mechanisms to adapt whilst most managed with their immediate family being there and maintaining contact with friends through phone calls. Receiving support from various sources was highlighted as crucial in improving the psychosocial outcomes of adolescents. Similar findings were reported by Duby *et al.,* (2022) who indicated that participants in her study relied on sources such as family, friends, schools and mental health practitioners for social support. In cohorts with Mankowitz (2018) on the Ubuntu ideology, the study results accentuate the need for a support system which includes family, peers and community as essential for normal psychosocial development and functioning in school going adolescents.

In line with the people-centric Ubuntu philosophy, individualism is not viable, for it is inadequate as a model to understand the basic human elements of a society (Khoza, 2006). A key component of the Ubuntu ideology is having a strong personal support network as it argues that "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" translated to mean we are because of the network of support we receive from one another (Mankowitz, 2018). This lack of support compounded negative feelings about the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown for these adolescents, thereby adversely impacting their psychosocial functioning. A support system gives them the assurance that they have someone to confide in, and adolescents who have one are more likely to use constructive coping strategies, which promote positive psychosocial functioning.

Individuals who lack a support system are more likely to resort to harmful coping mechanisms such as drug and alcohol abuse, illegal activities, depression, and inappropriate company, ultimately resulting in negative psychosocial functioning. People however use healthy coping methods when there is a sense of community, empathy, and support (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). A fundamental tenet of the Ubuntu ideology is "survival". According to Setlhodi (2019), as per the primary survival principle of Ubuntu, having people support you is crucial because it fosters consciousness and competence, which are the results of being able to adapt and survive in challenging environments. Considering this, adolescents clearly needed to receive some kind of support during the COVID-19 epidemic for them to develop optimally and exhibit normal psychological functioning.

The study also showed that the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the socioeconomic vulnerabilities experienced by the participants and their families. These included financial and food insecurity and higher levels of domestic violence exposure in their homes. Other studies (Duby *et al.,* 2022; Gittings *et al.,* 2021) also reported significant economic strain, as many families faced job losses, financial insecurity, and increased reliance on social grants. This is noteworthy as financial difficulties can create a cascade of effects that negatively influence mental health (e.g., increased stress, anxiety, and depression) while also limiting access to necessary support and resources (Haine *et al.,* 2025). These findings are concerning and warrant pandemic responsive social work interventions to effectively address these psychosocial risk factors identified in the study.

This is where innovative social work interventions and strategies responsive to pandemic situations are urgently needed to address these identified psychosocial risk factors. Zibengwa and Tanga (2023) contend that

the Ubuntu philosophical values of cohesion, social justice, empowerment, capacity building, sustainability, and asset-building can be a bedrock upon which responsive social work practice is anchored. Whilst du Plessis *et al.,* (2024) further maintain that young people are pivotal in extending the values of Ubuntu and enhancing civic responsibility within the largely structurally inequitable socio-political sphere prevalent in South Africa. Zibengwa and Tanga (2023) clearly indicate that the role of social work regarding poverty and unemployment is to empower beneficiaries to become independent and self-sufficient. Most scholars such as du Plessis *et al.,* (2024) and Chigangaidze (2022) advocate for Ubuntu approach given its tenets of humaneness and collective well-being through support, collaboration, interaction, and interconnectedness.

The participants in the study were adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and their psychosocial functioning compounded by the isolation and lack of human connectedness. Ubuntu implies that the meaning in life is dependent upon the quality of human relationships and on good-quality dialogue as found in human relationships; the Ubuntu philosophy essentially views the person in the context of the community, which is also significant to the perspective of the person-in-the-environment in social work practice (Chigangaidze, 2022). A responsive social work practice that is entrenched in Ubuntu, will move beyond traditional welfarist and remedial approaches as recommended by Zibengwa & Tanga (2023), whilst Haine *et al.,* (2025) advocate for resilience focused programs that provide young people with adaptive coping skills and mitigate barriers essential for buffering the psychosocial impacts of crises such as COVID-19.

The authors contend that interventions (individual, school or community based) undergirded by the Ubuntu philosophy are critical to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on adolescents. In this instance, school social work programs will benefit adolescents tremendously. School social work must become an integral part of the education context to play a role in the holistic development of learners. According to Mugumbate (2025) the models of school social work that have a chance of success in Africa should be grounded in the African philosophy of Ubuntu.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study's objective was to assess the psychosocial functioning effects on the school going adolescents because of the COVID -19 pandemic lockdown. Adverse psychosocial functioning effects were revealed by the study. The findings suggest that the mental health issues experienced such as increased stress and anxiety levels, and depression were attributed to the lockdown. Adolescents also struggled with academic disruptions, lack of support and experienced feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, helplessness and mostly felt overwhelmed by the circumstances caused by the pandemic such as lack of contact with peers. Some struggled to cope whilst others adopted healthy coping mechanisms which bolstered their resilience. Some of the research participants also expressed a dire need for counselling services which were unfortunately not accessible to them given the restrictions.

By the time of the study (data collection) the school going adolescents had not received any form of counselling to mitigate the adverse psychosocial functioning effects-thereby increasing the chances of long-term implications if not addressed. These findings highlight the importance of school social work services, which provide the support needed to adolescents and equip them with strategies and skills to better cope. In conclusion, these findings are crucial and warrant the development of interventions for use in times of pandemics, emergencies and disasters where face to face contact is not feasible. These interventions must be accessed in various platforms including virtually, to mitigate risk associated with long-term psychosocial effects and lack of appropriate support in times of distress for school-going adolescents.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

- The study has reiterated the importance of adolescents' voice in research to understand their experiences on social issues from their point of view, not from external perspectives. Understanding issues from their direct source as individuals who experienced COVID -19 pandemic lockdown is crucial for the development of tailor-made interventions to address the identified psychosocial effects effectively.
- Based on the findings, it is evident that some of the school-going adolescents are not adequately equipped with strategies and tools to deal with distressing conditions such as COVID-19 pandemic. Policy makers need to consider the development of compulsory school social work interventions that focus on the development of a healthy psychosocial well-being of adolescents. Strategies such as stress management and healthy coping mechanisms are essential in enhancing their resilience and minimizing risk factors associated with psychosocial functioning effects. Adolescent mental health should be prioritized as it's currently neglected.
- Multi sectoral and coordinated pandemic responsive solutions are essential in schools and surrounding communities- these should be available in communities to garner communal support and be undergirded by African theories such as Ubuntu, and they are relevant to the African context. Such interventions will strengthen solidarity, collectivism, teamwork, collaborations and interconnectedness as they speak to the fibre

of our being as Africans.

- Social Work training institutions have a role to play in ensuring that student social workers are placed in school settings to provide essential social work services to school-going adolescents
- Social Work training institutions also need to consider advancements in technology and innovations in the development of curriculum content and services that are pandemic responsive and can delivered without actual human contact as traditional service delivery methods were not conductive for pandemic environments. These need to be evidence based, appropriate, cost effective and innovative as social work service delivery is deemed as essential services. There is clearly a gap, thus relevant methods of service delivery need to be devised, evaluated and offered in such circumstances

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, unprecedented events like the COVID-19 pandemic have a great potential of adversely impacting the psychosocial functioning of school-going adolescents as evidenced by the study findings. These suggested that adolescents struggled with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and expressed feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, helplessness and being generally overwhelmed. This was attributed to the restrictions that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown which prevented them from accessing adequate support when needed, the social work profession was found wanting in this regard. The study highlighted a gap in terms of social work interventions grounded in Ubuntu theory as we are people that value human connections and thrive with other individuals. It is thus imperative that the social work profession develops innovative interventions responsive to pandemic conditions to ensure adolescents always have access to much needed support in trying times-these should be inclusive of school-based strategies. Multi sectoral approaches are also highly recommended as collaborative efforts essential for ensuring that school-going adolescents are adequately equipped with necessary support, tools and strategies in difficult circumstances as these are key in alleviating the risks associated with poor psychosocial functioning and bolstering resilience.

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