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The contribution of Safe Parks to school safety: Lessons from the Thari Programme

Abstract

Unsafe and violent schools are a widespread problem in South Africa. This paper argues that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) contribute to this phenomenon. While various individual and community-level interventions to address ACEs have been reported on, the contribution of safe parks towards preventing school violence has not yet been explored. To support schools in dealing with violence, the Adopt-a-School Foundation introduced a pilot project at eight schools in Botshabelo in the Free State Province. The programme included psychosocial support services, establishing safe parks, and ensuring community involvement. The goal was to improve school communities by creating environments that are empowering, academically effective, gender sensitive and free from violence. Although there are safe parks in communities around South Africa, they are an uncommon sight at schools. This paper reports on the quantitative study conducted on safe parks' contribution to making schools safer and less violent. Results show that safe park activities improve community well-being, including reduced gangsterism, enhanced learner safety, and decreased disciplinary problems. It is recommended that safe parks continue to provide psychosocial services to children at schools and that their programmes be expanded to include more services.

Keywords: *adverse childhood experiences, child and youth care workers, safe parks, school violence, Thari programme*

1. Introduction

Social ills such as poverty, unemployment, family life destruction, racial and gender discrimination, substance abuse and gender-based violence are daily experiences for many South African children and their families, in both communities and in schools (Crime Stats SA, 2019; Reyneke, 2020; Van Zyl, 2022). School violence is defined as any act of violence, physical or emotional, occurring in an educational environment, when travelling to and from a school-related event, or during such an event. It includes violence between learners, learners and educators, and educators and educators (DBE, 2015). The 2012 National

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School Violence Study found that 12,2% of learners had been threatened with violence by someone at school, 6,3% had been assaulted, 4,7% had been sexually assaulted or raped, and 4,5% had been robbed at school (Burton & Leoschut, 2013).

Media reports suggest that school violence is on the increase (Van Zyl, 2022; 2023). This is a great cause for concern, because the trauma associated with these violent experiences might impair learners' academic ability, lead to various developmental problems, and increase delinquency in and out of the school environment (Day *et al.*, 2015; Lynn-Whaley & Sugarmann, 2017).

To address this concern, the Adopt-a-School Foundation, a subsidiary of the Cyril Ramaphosa Foundation, embarked on a pilot project aimed at supporting women and children in eight schools in Botshabelo in the Free State Province. The Thari Women and Children Support Programme consists of three pillars: psychosocial support services, the establishment of safe parks, and the creation and strengthening of community forums (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017). The ultimate goal is to "strengthen the school community by creating a safe and empowering environment that is free from violence, academically effective, inclusive, gender-sensitive, and promotes health and well-being for all" (Sitshange, 2021: 8). The programme was launched in April 2017 and evaluated in 2022.

An extensive study on the contribution of the programme towards strengthening the school community to protect women and children against violence and exploitation was done. The research problem addressed in this paper was to analyse how safe parks can contribute to the protection and support of learners and what recommendations can be made for improving these parks. For this purpose, the views of caregivers[1] of children attending the safe parks managed by the programme were drawn upon.

2. Literature review

Section 28 (1)(c–d) of the Constitution of 1996 (RSA, 1996) provides that children have a right to social services and that they must be protected against maltreatment, neglect and degradation. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires all ratifying countries to "recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (United Nations, 1989: 9). In this regard, the Isibindi Programme was developed in the early 2000s, specifically aimed at protecting Orphaned and Vulnerable Children [OVC] (Networking HIV and AIDS Community of Southern Africa [NACOSA] 2016). This programme, managed by Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWers), sought to address the psychosocial well-being of these at-risk children by, among other things, combining life space support with safe parks where children can learn and play in a safe environment. In 2017, 400 safe parks in South Africa supported more than 400 000 children (UNICEF South Africa, 2017). This program receives support from the Department of Social Development, as research findings indicate its effectiveness in delivering community-based care and protection services to vulnerable children under the age of 18 years (USAID, 2016; DSD, 2019). However, the influence of these safe parks in preventing violence in schools has not been established conclusively.

1 In this paper 'caregivers' include parents, foster parents and adults or older children taking care of children.

Following extensive consultations with the Botshabelo community, key stakeholders, including the Department of Basic Education (inclusive education and school safety), Department of Social Development, Department of Health, school governing bodies, circuit managers, the University of the Free State, NGOs, and school staff, a comprehensive assessment of community challenges was undertaken. Among the 15 secondary schools in Botshabelo, four were identified as high risk due to issues such as gangsterism, teenage pregnancy, violence, poverty, and other prevalent social ills (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017). It was decided to include the feeder schools of the secondary schools to allow for a long-term investment in these learners. This programme mainly provides services by CYCWers who provide interventions in the living environment of childrenthrough home visits and services at safe parks (NACCW, 2018). While the programme provides various psychosocial services at schools (Sitshange, 2021), this paper focuses on the services provided at the safe parks and their contribution towards creating safe schools.

One formal and seven informal safe parks were established at the identified schools. Formal safe parks have adequate infrastructure for activities and private spaces for counselling. In contrast, informal safe parks utilise school play areas and movable equipment and do not have the proper infrastructure (Cyril Ramaphosa Foundation, 2019; NACOSA, 2016). Activities at safe parks include homework supervision, remedial programmes, reading programmes, Persona doll activities (used to identify signs of abuse), and structured recreation and play (Lego, puzzles, sports, educational games such as chess and Scrabble, etc.) (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2017). Isibindi safe parks include traditional cultural activities; respite for child-headed households as CYCWers care for smaller children; group discussions on themes such as HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse; developmental programmes for adolescents; food security programmes; and holiday programmes (NACCW, 2014). In 2019, it was reported that the safe parks reached 2 366 children, indicating that a significant number of children benefited from the activities mentioned above (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2019).

The psychosocial development of learners is one of the main aims of the Thari Programme. According to Galappatti (2003), the general perception is that psychosocial work is limited to counselling. However, it includes awareness raising and psycho-education, interpersonal skills development, social activities, mobilising of social networks, supportive practices for child development, skills training, provision of material support, strengthening of the spiritual dimension, psychology-oriented skills training, training on issues such as children's rights, and improving links and interchange between resources (Galappatti, 2003).

Despite all their valuable services, safe parks do not explicitly focus on preventing school violence. However, most children attending the safe parks are vulnerable, and vulnerable children have a higher chance of displaying violent behaviour brought on by their exposure to, for example, neglect, poverty, abuse, and multiple trauma. In addition, they have a higher risk of HIV and are usually prone to high levels of psychological distress, including depression (Visser, Zungu & Ndala-Magoro, 2015).

These experiences, known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), have an impact not only on children's current behaviour, but also on their future health and well-being (Anda *et al.*, 2006:183; Sciaraffa, Zeanah & Zeanah, 2018). Sciaraffa *et al.* (2018) report that the more ACEs children face, the higher the extent of their learning difficulties, health issues and behavioural issues. This shows a high probability that vulnerable children will present with

behavioural problems such as violence. Add to this the fact that unsupervised children are at risk of delinquent behaviour after school, and it becomes clear why there is a need for after-school services such as safe parks (Minney *et al.*, 2019).

This paper is grounded in the conceptual framework of resilience theory. Van Breda (2018: 4) defines resilience as "the multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better than expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity". This definition implies that multiple systems can contribute to improving the resilience of vulnerable children. Van Wyk (2020) concurs by stating that children's psychological make-up and the systems within which they find themselves (family, school, religious institutions) can assist them in mediating adverse experiences. Protective factors such as personal characteristics (self-regulation and self-concept), family functioning, community and peer support, cultural development, faith, level of cognitive development, autonomy experiences, increased education, skills and training can also moderate the negative effects of risk exposure (Lee & Stewart, 2013; Van Wyk, 2020).

This paper argues that well-managed safe parks that provide psychosocial services could strengthen children's resilience and assist them in dealing with ACEs more effectively, which will in turn reduce violent or aggressive behaviour and contribute to safer schools.

3. Methodology

This paper presents findings from a segment of a quantitative study that has evaluated the Thari Programme extensively. The research methodology employed was quantitative, featuring a non-experimental design using a cross-sectional survey (Creswell, 2014). This approach allowed for an exploratory and descriptive analysis of the Thari programme (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

The research questions addressed in this paper were to determine how safe parks contribute to making schools safer and less violent and how these parks can be improved.

The population consisted of all the caregivers of children attending the safe parks of the eight schools in the programme. Non-probability sampling with a purposive sampling technique was applied to identify 120 (N=120) respondents (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Only 115 (n=115) questionnaires could be used, since not all were fully completed. Participants had to be available during the day to ensure the safety of the fieldworkers. Thus, working caregivers who returned to their homes late in the afternoon were excluded.

It could be seen as a limitation that working caregivers were not included in the study, potentially introducing bias regarding the perspectives of non-working caregivers. However, considering the focus of the study and the safety of fieldworkers, it was considered that it would be acceptable to only include non-working caregivers as participants.

The questionnaire was constructed based on the information gathered from the qualitative part of the study. The questionnaire was piloted by asking 16 respondents to complete the survey, after which they were asked to comment on the clarity of the questions and instructions. Changes were made accordingly (Braun & Clarke, 2013)they have to be mechanically air-conditioned to achieve the required thermal comfort for worshippers especially in harsh climatic regions. This paper describes the physical and operating characteristics typical for the intermittently occupied mosques as well as the results of the thermal optimization of a medium size mosque in the two hot-dry and hot-humid Saudi Arabian cities of Riyadh and

Jeddah. The analysis utilizes a direct search optimization technique that is coupled to an hourly energy simulation program. Based on that, design guidelines are presented for the optimum thermal performance of mosques in these two cities in addition to other design and operating factors that need to be considered for mosques in general. © 2009 The Author(s. For the survey completion, fieldworkers were present to explain terms and concepts, when necessary. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the items.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the General Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State. The ethical guidelines of Rubin and Babbie (2011) were followed to protect respondents, namely informed consent, voluntary participation, avoidance of harm/mitigation of risk and privacy/anonymity/confidentiality.

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Socio-demographics

According to the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, the participants' ages did not follow a normal distribution (W=0.96186, p=0.0073). Consequently, the median and interquartile ranges are reported. The median age was 40, with the interquartile ranging between 33 and 47 years. Data analysis show that some respondents were 13 years old, but further investigation revealed that some of the caregivers gave the age and gender of their children in this question. I identified all these cases. With that in mind, some of the socio-demographic data were not considered. Thus, although there were 115 participants in the study (n=115), for the description of the participantsas depicted in Table 1, n=95.

Table 1: Analysis of age variable of respondents

Analysis variable: Age							
N	**Median**	**25th pctl**	**75th pctl**	**Mean**	**Std dev**	**Minimum**	**Maximum**
95	40.0	33.0	47.0	41.3	11.5	20.0	76.0

Most respondents were female (62%), followed by males (21%). Seventeen per cent (17%) of the respondents did not indicate their gender. In South Africa, 41,9% of households are headed by women, so most respondents were expected to be female (Stats SA, 2020: 7). Of the total respondents, 32 (29%) represented the primary schools and 78 (71%) the secondary schools. There was thus an overrepresentation of parents with high school children attending the safe parks.

3.1.1.1 Age of children

According to the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, the distribution of the children's ages was normal (W=0.974173, p=0.2415). Consequently, the mean and standard deviation are reported. The minimum age of the children attending the safe parks whose caregivers completed the questionnaires were eight (8) years, and the oldest 20 years. The mean age was 13,8 years. This corresponds with the results, which indicate that 56% of the respondents' children were at primary school.

3.1.1.2 Schools at which the children attended a safe park

Seven of the safe parks each represented 11 or more respondents. Only the safe park at School H, a secondary school, provided fewer respondents (6). The reason for School C contributing 17 respondents was because the fieldworker was not sure whether the questionnaires of two respondents would be acceptable and decided to have another two respondents complete the questionnaire. Ultimately, all of the questionnaires could be used.

Schools A–D were primary schools, and Schools E–H were secondary schools. It can be said that there was a good representation of respondents among the different safe parks.

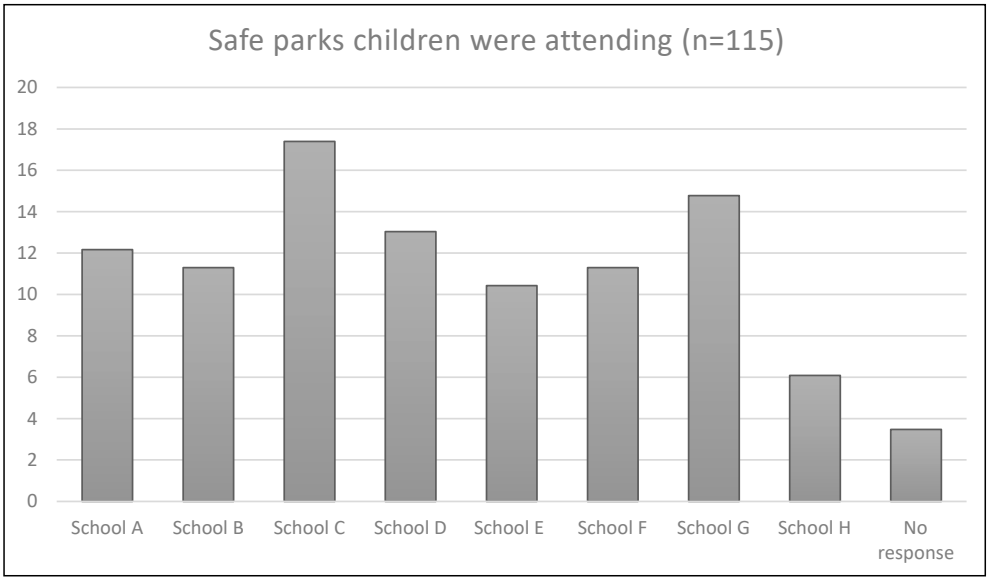

Figure 1: Safe parks that children were attending at the various schools

3.1.2 Need for counselling

The respondents were asked whether the children in their community required counselling, and 65% indicated that children could benefit from counselling services (Table 2).

Table 2: Need for counselling

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
No response	1	0.87	1	0.87
Yes	75	65.22	76	66.09
No	18	15.65	94	81.74
Unsure	21	18.26	115	100.00

3.1.2.1 Areas of counselling needed

In a follow-up question, the respondents who indicated that children needed counselling (n=93) were asked in which areas counselling was required. The areas that stood out were family problems (55%), substance abuse (55%), emotional problems (52%) and teenage pregnancy (49%). It is clear from Table 3 that caregivers' perceptions are that children in their communities are susceptible to the mentioned problems above, which suggest that these children are exposed to ACEs. Significant differences between the two groups were identified regarding conflict with parents and substance abuse. Other noteworthy differences were emotional problems, teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse. The expectation was that children in secondary schools would be more vulnerable to experiencing the problems above (Louw & Louw, 2020).

Table 3: Areas of counselling needed

	Combined (n=96)	Primary (n=50)	Secondary (n=43)	Chi-square p=
Emotional problems	52.08	42.00	60.47	0.0758
Family problems	55.21	54.00	55.81	0.8609
Anger management	41.67	38.00	44.19	0.5451
Conflict with parents	35.42	22.00	48.84	0.0066
Substance abuse	55.21	44.00	69.77	0.0126
Teenage pregnancy	48.96	40.00	58.14	0.0809
Poverty	47.92	40.00	53.49	0.1933
Social problems	17.71	12.00	20.93	0.2430
Bullying	39.58	32.00	48.84	0.0981
Traumatic events	30.21	26.00	34.88	0.3518
Poor self-image	23.96	20.00	27.91	0.3710
Sexual abuse	19.79	12.00	27.91	0.0529

3.1.3 Caregivers' perceptions of the benefits of safe parks

The advantages of safe parks are examined in relation to school and community safety, as well as learner *behaviour*.

3.1.3.1 School and community safety

This section of the questionnaire addressed the contribution of safe parks towards dealing with gangsterism, which has been a problem since the programme started. Questions included whether the safe parks aided the safety of learners and reduced disciplinary problems.

3.1.3.1.1 Dealing with gangs

Table 4 shows that most participants (61%) felt that the safe parks contributed to dealing with gangsterism, while some respondents (30%) were unsure. There was no significant difference between the two groups (p=0.0911).

Table 4: Dealing with gangs

	% for both groups (n=115)	Combined responses	Primary (n=62)	Secondary (n=49)
Did not answer	6.09		0.00	10.20
Made no contribution at all	3.48	3.48	3.23	4.08
Made a small contribution	9.57	29.57	12.90	6.12
Made a fair contribution	20.00		16.13	24.49
Made a significant contribution	11.30	31.30	9.68	14.29
Made a large contribution	20.00		22.58	18.37
Unsure	29.57	29.57	35.48	22.45

3.1.3.1.2 Safety of learners

Just over half (52%) of the respondents felt the parks made a significant or large contribution, while 29% thought they made a small to fair contribution. Thus, it is safe to say that the respondents felt that a contribution was made to the safety of children (Table 5). No significant difference was found between the two groups (p=0.0629).

Table 5: Contribution of safe parks to the safety of children

	% for both groups (n=115)	Combined responses	Primary (n=62)	Secondary (n=49)
Did not answer	4.35		0.00	6.12
Made no contribution at all	1.74	1.74	3.23	0.00
Made a small contribution	11.30	28.69	14.52	8.16
Made a fair contribution	17.39		9.68	26.53
Made a significant contribution	21.74	52.17	22.58	22.45
Made a large contribution	30.43		35.48	26.53
Unsure	13.04	13.04	14.52	10.20

3.1.3.2 Learner behaviour

This section assesses whether the safe parks mitigated disciplinary issues effectively and contributed positively to enhancing learner *behaviour*.

3.1.3.2.1 Reducing disciplinary issues

It is argued that caregivers would hear from their children what is happening at school; thus, they would have an opinion on the state of discipline in schools. It was further contended that, among the children who attended the safe parks, some would contribute to disciplinary problems at their schools. The hope was, of course, that attendance would influence their behaviour positively.

Most respondents (39%) thought that safe parks contributed a significant to large extent towards reducing disciplinary problems, while 33% believed that they made a small to fair contribution (Table 6). A significant difference was found between the responses of the two groups (p=0.0161). More secondary school caregivers did not answer the question or were unsure whether safe parks reduced disciplinary problems, whereas primary school caregivers overall held the opinion that safe parks were contributing towards reducing disciplinary problems. One reason for this difference might be that the CYCWers have a more significant influence on the smaller children than on the older ones. Additionally, the structured and developmentally focused nature of programmes at primary school safe parks may contribute to the perceived positive impact. The safe parks at the secondary schools are also not as well developed as those at the primary schools, which may have contributed to secondary school learners attending fewer of the programs (Adopt-A-School Foundation, 2022).

Table 6: Contribution of safe parks towards reducing disciplinary problems

	% for both groups (n=115)	Combined responses	Primary (n=62)	Secondary (n=49)
Did not answer	8.70		0.00	16.33
Made no contribution at all	2.61	2.61	3.23	2.04
Made a small contribution	11.30	33.04	14.52	8.16
Made a fair contribution	21.74		19.35	24.49
Made a significant contribution	16.52	39.13	20.97	12.24
Made a large contribution	22.61		29.03	16.33
Unsure	16.52	16.52	12.90	20.41

3.1.3.2.2 Contribution to the improvement of learner behaviour

Having safe parks in the community comes at a financial cost. It is thus important to determine whether the cost is worthwhile. Respondents were asked whether they believed their children's attendance at the safe park improved their overall behaviour. This included their behaviour at home. Most respondents (58%) indicated that safe parks significantly improved their children's behaviour. Another 26% stated a small to fair contribution (Table 7). No significant differences were found between the responses of the two groups (p=0.4078). Overall, it can be said that the respondents believed that the safe parks played a role in improving the behaviour of children.

Table 7: Contribution of safe parks towards the improvement of children's behaviour

	% of both groups (n=115)	Combined	Primary (n=62)	Secondary (n=49)
Did not answer	6.96		1.61	10.20
Made no contribution at all	1.74	1.74	1.61	0.00
Made a small contribution	6.96	26.09	9.68	4.08
Made a fair contribution	19.13		20.97	18.37

	% of both groups (n=115)	Combined	Primary (n=62)	Secondary (n=49)
Made a significant contribution	20.87	58.26	19.35	22.45
Made a large contribution	37.39		40.32	36.73
Unsure	6.96	6.96	6.45	8.16

From the above, it is clear that safe parks contribute positively to the lives of children in many ways.

3.1.4 Caregivers' recommendations for the safe parks

The second research aim was to determine the effectiveness of safe parks. This section addressed caregivers' recommendations about the services provided by CYCWs, the psychosocial development of learners and the services offered at the safe parks.

3.1.4.1 Services of the CYCWer

This section of the questionnaire aimed to determine what the respondents would like to see the CYCWers do at safe parks. The respondents were asked to indicate at least five options. Eight participants indicated six options. In most cases, the sixth response was an addition to the list. It was thus decided to include those responses. Four respondents did not indicate the child's school, so n=109 for the groups.

According to Table 8, educational development was mentioned by most of the respondents (87%), followed by sports development (61%), counselling (48%) and keeping learners safe (47%). No significant differences were found between the two groups. Noteworthy differences included the need to play games with primary school learners and keep them safe before and after school (although this was not seen as that important in the developmental and support services question – Table 9). Considering the age of primary school children, the mentioned needs are justified, especially in cases where caregivers do not have the time to play with their children. On the other hand, secondary school learners need more counselling. This could be linked to the areas of counselling required, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 8: What caregivers want CYCWers to do at safe parks

	Combined (n=111)	Primary (n=61)	Secondary (n=48)	Chi-square p=
Educational development	86.49	86.89	87.50	0.9241
Sports development	61.26	62.30	60.42	0.8414
Cultural development	13.51	11.48	16.67	0.4348
Home visits and providing feedback to the school	30.63	32.79	27.08	0.5200
Counselling	47.75	42.62	54.17	0.2310
Supporting the school-based support team (SBST)	21.62	19.67	25.00	0.5052
Playing games with learners	42.34	63.04	36.96	0.2032
General support to learners	28.83	26.23	31.25	0.5641

	Combined (n=111)	Primary (n=61)	Secondary (n=48)	Chi-square p=
Keeping learners safe before and after school hours	46.85	54.10	37.50	0.0847
Supporting parents with parenting skills	20.72	21.31	20.83	0.9516
Being a support system for learners so that they have someone to talk to	28.83	27.87	29.17	0.8815
Awareness campaigns on social issues	38.74	37.70	39.58	0.8414
Ensuring a safe school environment	26.13	27.87	22.92	0.5569
Other	3.60	4.92	2.08	0.4346

3.1.4.2 Psychosocial development of learners

Respondents were questioned about which developmental/support services they thought should be provided by the CYCWs at the safe parks. Again, they were limited to five options. Twelve respondents indicated six, of which most added a need. Some of these were added to the options in the questionnaire since they were duplications. It was decided to use all the responses.

Apart from primary school caregivers wanting their children to learn computers skills (p=0.0180) and secondary school caregivers wanting a feeding scheme (p=0.0322), there were no significant differences between the groups (Table 9). Sixty-eight per cent (68%) of the respondents indicated that reading and writing support should be available at the safe parks. This high percentage corresponds to the large number of South African learners who cannot read and write (NCES, 2018).

Other needs mentioned by respondents were the development of children's problem-solving skills (60%) and helping them to identify and develop their strengths (58%). One would have expected these needs to be addressed as part of the school and home educational process, which does not seem to be the case. Caregivers might feel that they lack the ability to assist their children in these matters. Capacity-building initiatives could benefit caregivers, aiding them in enhancing their children's resilience.

The need for homework support (54%) and computer literacy (50%) was also mentioned. The only large, but statistically insignificant difference between the groups was that the older children's caregivers expressed a greater need to be linked to support structures such as social and health services.

Table 9: Developmental and support services that CYCWers should provide

	Combined (n=114)	Primary (n=32)	Secondary (n=77)	Two-sided Pr <= P
Strengths development	57.89	53.23	65.31	0.1995
Problem-solving skills	59.65	61.29	59.18	0.8217
Reading and writing support	68.42	74.19	63.27	0.2149
Computer skills	50.00	61.29	38.78	0.0180

	Combined (n=114)	Primary (n=32)	Secondary (n=77)	Two-sided Pr <= P
Support with homework	54.38	56.45	53.06	0.7215
Sports development	33.33	32.26	34.69	0.7869
Awareness and dealing with social ills	21.93	20.97	20.41	0.9424
Clean school environment	21.93	19.35	24.49	0.5140
Interpersonal skills	17.54	19.35	14.29	0.4814
Peer pressure	45.61	41.94	46.94	0.5981
Feeding scheme	14.04	8.06	22.45	0.0322
Safety of learners	20.18	22.58	18.37	0.5866
Access to formal documentation	7.89	9.68	4.08	0.2576
Linking with support structures	13.16	8.06	18.37	0.1045
Parenting skills	12.28	12.90	10.20	0.6606

3.1.4.3 Services at the safe parks

Respondents were asked to indicate five services they would like safe parks to deliver. Eight respondents indicated six services. Owing to the small number of participants, all their responses were included in the data analysis (n=108 for combined and n=103 for the groups).

Most respondents indicated that support services, such as homework (81%) and educational games (76%), could help learners with their academic work. The safety of learners (59%) and counselling of learners (58%) followed. Respondents added the need for driving lessons and computer literacy (other). Interestingly, there was a low need for holiday programmes (8%) and general recreation and socialising (12%), although the need for recreational programmes was much larger for older children (18%). Clearly, caregivers see a safe park as a service that should stimulate and support children with their academic work and psychosocial needs and provide structured and educational play. No significant differences were found between the needs of the two groups.

Table 10: Services respondents would like to see at safe parks

	Combined (n=108)	Primary (n=58)	Secondary (n=45)	Chi-square p=
Homework supervision and support	81.13	84.48	75.56	0.2559
Sports development	52.83	44.83	60.00	0.1265
Cultural development	31.13	34.48	28.89	0.5462
Keeping learners safe	59.43	63.79	53.33	0.2840
Counselling	58.49	58.62	60.00	0.8876
Support system	50.94	55.17	46.67	0.3916
Educational games	76.42	75.86	77.78	0.8196

	Combined (n=108)	Primary (n=58)	Secondary (n=45)	Chi-square p=
General support	41.51	41.38	40.00	0.8876
Reading skills	21.70	22.41	22.22	0.9815
Social skills	6.60	5.17	8.89	0.4573
Structured holiday programmes	7.55	8.62	6.67	0.7132
General recreation and socialising	12.26	8.62	17.78	0.1651
Other	3.77	3.45	4.44	0.7952

3.1.5 Caregivers' overall satisfaction with the safe parks

3.1.5.1 Need for safe parks

An overwhelming number (94%) of respondents indicated that a safe park was needed at their child's school (Table 11). It can be deduced that caregivers perceive safe parks as valuable resources and desire their children to have access to them. Building on the preceding section, it can be deduced that their reasons for this inclination may stem from their perceptions of the safe parks' contributions to children's safety and improved discipline.

Table 11: Need for safe parks at schools

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
No response	4	3.48	4	3.48
Yes	108	93.91	112	97.39
No	1	0.87	113	98.26
Unsure	2	1.74	115	100.00

3.1.5.2 Satisfaction with safe parks

Respondents were satisfied with the services provided at the safe parks. This is evident in the 80% of respondents who were satisfied and extremely satisfied with the services provided by safe parks (Table 12). Only two respondents (2%) were unsatisfied with the services at the parks.

Table 12: Respondents' satisfaction with services provided at safe parks

	Frequency	Percentage	Combined	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
Did not answer	9	7.83		9	7.83
Extremely satisfied	44	38.26	80.00	53	46.09
Satisfied	48	41.74		101	87.83
Neutral	12	10.43	10.43	113	98.26
Unsatisfied	1	0.87	1.74	114	99.13
Extremely unsatisfied	1	0.87		115	100.00

3.1.5.3 Recommendation to other caregivers

Eighty-one per cent (81%) of the respondents would encourage other caregivers to send their children to safe parks. Only one respondent indicated he/she would not do so (Table 13).

Table 13: Respondents' inclination to encourage others to send their children to safe parks

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative frequency	Cumulative percentage
No response	4	3.48	4	3.48
Yes	93	80.87	97	84.35
No	1	0.87	98	85.22
Maybe	2	1.74	100	86.96
It depends on the services provided	15	13.04	115	100.00

4. Discussion and recommendations

Mostly, the responses of the primary and secondary school caregivers did not differ significantly. A total of 65% indicated that children in the community needed counselling regarding family problems (55%), substance abuse (55%), emotional problems (52%) and teenage pregnancy (49%). Other counselling needs included dealing with poverty, bullying, caregiver conflict, and sexual abuse.

The larger part of the literature agrees that the ACEs include experiences of violence, abuse and neglect, and lead to high-risk behaviours such as mental health issues, substance use, suicidality, teenage pregnancy and violence (Lee *et al.*, 2022)mental distress, and suicide risk among Zambian youth. Methods: Data from Zambia Violence Against Children and Youth Survey were used (18-24 years old, n=1034. Since 42% of respondents indicated that children needed help with anger management, it can be hypothesised that this anger may stem from ACEs (Jackson *et al.*, 2023). Helping children deal with anger issues will assist in reducing violence in schools. The Thari Programme offers such help through the psychosocial support services provided by social service professionals. This encompasses home visits for assessments and parental engagement, case containment, short-term counselling, and the referral of statutory cases (such as abuse and neglect) to the Department of Social Development, among other interventions (Reyneke, 2024).

ACEs have been associated with unfavourable educational outcomes, including lower grades, poor academic achievement, school dropouts, diminished school aspirations and engagement, increased school suspensions, and reduced attendance. To enhance the educational outcomes of children facing ACEs, interventions should concentrate on potential protective factors, such as improving relationships between learners and educators, fostering connections between learners and their caregivers, and enhancing a sense of belonging within the school environment (Stewart-Tufescu *et al.*, 2022). School-based interventions, like safe parks, can thus play a role in bolstering the resilience of learners. The provision of educational support, including educational games, assistance with homework, and assistance with reading and writing (Tables 9 and 10), holds the potential to contribute to the development of these protective factors.

The CYCWs are the primary caregivers at the safe parks and are responsible for the first line of psychosocial services. Respondents would like them to focus on educational activities, support with homework, sports development, counselling, keeping learners safe and being a support system for children (Tables 4 and 10). These services will ensure that children experience a sense of belonging and mastery and that their voices are heard. These mediating processes will strengthen their resilience (Van Wyk, 2020).

Given that around 48% of respondents perceived their children to be affected by poverty (Table 3), the unexpectedly low demand for a feeding scheme at the safe parks raises questions. This discrepancy might be explained by the existence of school-based feeding schemes (Gopal & Collings, 2017) that provide morning meals, potentially leaving children hungry in the afternoon during safe park activities. Despite the Isibindi model's provision for meals, these safe parks deviate from the model (USAID, 2016). Another unmet need in the programme is computer literacy training, which could prepare the children for life after school. Implementing such a programme would align with Section 213(3) of the Children's Act of 2005 (RSA, 2005), emphasizing the appropriateness of programmes for children at drop-in centres.

Another interesting finding was the need for skills development so that children can become self-sufficient. In this regard, the programme assists with homework and reading and writing support, for example, by letting the learners play Scrabble. The programme also provides services towards developing resilience skills (e.g. problem-solving and social competence), leading to improved academic performance and reduced risky behaviours. This aligns with the Circle of Courage model of resilience (Van Wyk, 2020). Thus, the safe park activities meet the needs of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity.

Most respondents (61%) felt that the safe parks contributed to dealing with gangsterism in the community. The safety of children also seems to have improved, since 52% of respondents felt that the parks made a significant to large contribution in this regard, while another 29% thought that it made a small to fair contribution. Safe parks, thus, seem to have the potential to help communities deal with gangs. One of the main reasons why children tend to join a gang is the need for connection (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2017). Safe parks fulfil this need through their available activities, and the CYCWs create an environment of belonging through their interaction with the children (Van Wyk, 2020). The results showed that they seem to have a larger influence on the behaviour of smaller children than on older children. This observation may be attributed to the fact that children in middle childhood (6–12 years) are typically more influenced by their parents and family members (Louw & Louw, 2022). Given the CYCWs' close involvement with children who have experienced ACEs, they may unintentionally assume a caregiving role, thereby having a more significant impact on the *behaviour* of these children.

Thirty-nine per cent (39%) of respondents felt that the parks made a significant to large contribution to reducing disciplinary problems, while 33% believed they made a small to fair contribution. Thus, children with disciplinary problems would seem to benefit from attending safe parks since the psychosocial programmes (Table 10), physical and sport activities and free play and recreational activities (Adopt-a-School Foundation, 2019) could contribute to fewer disciplinary problems in the school and their homes. In addition to this, it is worth noting that safe park activities have the potential to enhance the resilience of children. These

activities offer support, foster cultural development, contribute to cognitive and educational development, and provide opportunities for skills development, all of which can also contribute to fewer disciplinary problems (Van Wyk, 2020).

Regarding children's behaviour in general, 58% of respondents indicated that the safe parks contributed to a significant improvement. The majority (80%) of respondents also indicated that they were satisfied with the services provided by safe parks, and 81% would recommend the safe parks to other caregivers. From the respondents' perspectives, the safe parks were a worthwhile investment in communities.

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that the services provided at the parks contributed emotionally and educationally to children's lives and could thus improve their resilience. Many caregivers have a low educational status and work far from home; therefore, they cannot provide some of the support children need (Stats SA, 2020). It is recommended that some CYCWers provide academic support, while others provide psychosocial support. This will require additional training and support from educators so that they can effectively help learners with homework.

It is further proposed that services be integrated and shared between the School-Based Support Team (SBST) and safe parks. For example, the SBST could refer learners with disciplinary problems to the safe parks for relevant programmes. In turn, safe parks should consider introducing socio-emotional learning (SEL) programmes as part of their psychosocial services since there is evidence that SEL can reduce the likelihood of aggression and other high-risk behaviours (Minney *et al.*, 2019).

Another recommendation is that the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture be engaged to support safe parks, specifically regarding the need for sports and cultural activities. While the Department partially supported the programme's sports initiatives, there is room for expansion. Engaging local sports and recreation clubs could further enhance the programme by providing additional coaching expertise and facilities. Lastly, it is recommended that the education assistant programme of the DBE is used to staff safe parks at schools.

Further research is needed on safe parks and how they can contribute to the improvement of the psychosocial well-being of children. This study established that safe parks contributed to improved behaviour and discipline. It is proposed that the extent of this contribution be investigated. Another focus of investigation could be the influence of the CYCWs on primary and secondary school learners, respectively. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches should be utilised.

5. Limitations

Because purposive sampling was applied, the findings cannot be generalised. Furthermore, the sample size was modest (n=115), thus restricting generalisation. Although the questionnaire was piloted, respondents still misinterpreted some questions, which the fieldworkers did not pick up. For this reason, some demographics do not reflect the whole sample.

A notable limitation emerges from the exclusive inclusion of non-working caregivers in the study. This introduces a bias towards the perspectives of this specific group, potentially skewing the overall findings. The absence of insights from working caregivers may have influenced the results and could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

The sole reliance on caregivers as the data source limits the perspectives available for analysis. Including children who attend the safe parks in the study could have provided a more holistic view, allowing for data triangulation and a more nuanced interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, the absence of information on caregivers restricts the ability to assess their potential contribution to the ACEs that children may be facing.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of information on the engagement of learners with the programme. The absence of data on how often children attend the safe parks and the duration of their participation hinders a comprehensive understanding of variations in the impact on *behaviour* and discipline. Moreover, this gap in information may also impede the ability to explain the differences observed between primary and secondary school learners.

6. Conclusion

Safe parks have shown a significant contribution to enhancing school safety, as evidenced by the findings that a majority of caregivers observed improvements in children's behaviour and a reduction in disciplinary problems. By providing structured educational and recreational activities, along with crucial psychosocial support, safe parks create a supportive environment that mitigates risks associated with violence, gang involvement, and other unsafe behaviours. This nurturing setting helps children to cope with personal and social challenges. It promotes positive behaviours that extend into school environments, effectively reducing instances of conflict and fostering a safer school atmosphere. Thus, safe parks play a pivotal role in ensuring that children are safe within their community spaces and carry these behaviours into their school settings, contributing to overall school safety.

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