

Scorecard can help monitor children's psycho-social health and wellbeing

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Many learners suffer from psycho-social impairments undermining their education. A new scorecard will help

Healthy early childhood development is fundamental to success and happiness, not only during childhood but throughout the course of a person's life. This not only includes linguistic and cognitive development but also physical, social and emotional development. This development and the environment surrounding a child could either enhance or hinder optimal development of the individual. Schools are seen as an important environment for the promotion of education, but they could also be crucial for the promotion of health in children, as well as their families and community, through specific health-promotion programmes. The right programmes in a school setting could make a positive contribution to the overall health of the children and society.

In South African schools, there are many learners who have very low levels of literacy despite having attended schooling from Grade 1 to Grade 12. These vulnerable learners have a high dropout rate. Many of these learners suffer from psycho-social impairments that affect their educational development. The possibility therefore exists that if these psycho-social impairments were to be diagnosed early a number of strategies could be implemented to assist the learner, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes.

Currently in South Africa, however, there are no instruments available for teachers to assess the psycho-social health and wellbeing of young learners. The use of such instrument could have a number of advantages for children, their families, teachers and the community.

Dr Karin Daniels from the Faculty of Community Health Sciences has developed a psycho-social health index scorecard for learners in early childhood that can be used by primary school teachers. The scorecard is based on an existing School Health Index (SHI) that has been developed by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and has been optimised for use in the South African context. This psycho-social health and wellbeing scorecard score was

designed following feedback from teachers, health promoters, psychologists, primary caregivers, social workers and experts in early childhood development, internationally and nationally.

The scorecard could be implemented by an education authority, allowing teachers to monitor their classes in a standardised and efficient manner.

Following its design, Dr Daniels engaged with a number of rural schools to receive feedback from teachers and school principals. The scorecard was considered to be user-friendly, as well as a useful tool for assessing the psycho-social health and wellbeing challenges of learners. Prototypes of the scorecard were distributed to seven rural schools in the Western Cape in a pilot programme to assess its ease of use as well as its efficacy in assessing psycho-social issues affecting the young learners. Teachers confirmed the benefits of such a tool, allowing them to identify vulnerable learners.

This is yet another example of community-based innovations emanating from universities through engagement and collaboration with all stakeholders.

The SHI is possibly the first comprehensive tool designed specifically for schools to assess and improve the strengths and weaknesses of their health-promotion policies and programmes. The intention of the implementation of the SHI is to develop action plans to improve the overall health of learners. On the other hand, the proposed School Health Index Score was designed for learners in early childhood development in South African, and is only four pages in length. The scorecard was also developed and designed taking into consideration the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) Policy. Nine key areas of the CSTL programme have been identified for the implementation of the programme, focusing on the immediate needs of communities: nutritional support; health promotion; infrastructure, water and sanitation; social welfare services; psycho-social support; and safety and protection.