

Article

Navigating Success and Adversity: Youth Work Practice in Formal Education in South Africa

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of youth workers within formal education settings in South Africa. Utilising a qualitative approach, the study sampled 22 youth workers participating in presidential youth employment initiatives in partnership with the Department of Basic Education. The findings indicate that youth workers play a vital role in promoting social development among young people within formal education settings, a result that aligns with the empowerment theory guiding this research. Specifically, youth workers provide essential psychosocial and mental health support, contributing to holistic youth development. However, their effectiveness is frequently constrained by operational issues, including limited institutional recognition and ambiguous role definitions. Furthermore, a lack of sustainable funding and restricted time allocations for youth work activities remain significant challenges. The study recommends the formal institutionalisation of professional youth work within South African education policy, supported by clear operational frameworks, structured collaboration, and enhanced training to ensure sustainable learner support.

Keywords: youth work; formal education; presidential youth employment initiative; rural schools; South Africa

1. Introduction

Cooper (2018) defines youth work practice as a range of extracurricular activities implemented outside formal schooling by professional or voluntary youth workers, with the primary aim of contributing to the holistic development of young people. Similarly, youth work practice is understood as a form of non-formal education that is intentionally structured to address young people's developmental needs through voluntary and relational engagement between youth workers and young people (Kiilakoski & Kauppinen, 2021; Hammond & McArdle, 2024). Youth work practice is therefore essential in supporting young people's development, as it complements learning and support processes that occur within traditional schooling systems (UK Youth, 2021). The Commonwealth Consortium for Education (2023) further argues that youth work plays a critical role in facilitating transformative social change by preparing young people for meaningful participation in society and future life trajectories. Globally, youth work continues to create safe and enabling spaces that promote positive developmental outcomes for young people. For example, in the Netherlands, youth work practice has been shown to create new developmental

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opportunities by supporting young people's social, emotional, and behavioural growth. Sustaining these positive outcomes requires effective collaboration between youth workers and key stakeholders involved in young people's development, including schools and other educational institutions (Todorović et al., 2024). Youth work is particularly significant across both non-formal and formal education contexts in the digital age, where young people are increasingly active online. In this regard, youth workers play an important role in supporting young people to navigate digital spaces responsibly by promoting awareness, digital literacy, and online safety (Todorovic et al., 2025).

Evidence from European contexts further demonstrates the value of integrating youth work within formal education. The effects of school-based youth work are connected to both the school culture and social level of schools, and to a certain extent to learning outcomes. In the Netherlands, youth workers operating in secondary school settings have been effective in addressing antisocial behaviour among young people (De Baat et al., 2014; Sarti et al., 2019). Similarly, in Scotland, the integration of youth work practice within formal education creates structured opportunities for skills development that are embedded within the school curriculum, thereby enhancing young persons' personal and social competencies (YouthLink Scotland, 2024). In Finland, long-term school-based youth work is connected to less self-reported school bullying (Kivijärvi et al., 2025). In the United Kingdom, schools increasingly contend with complex challenges faced by young people, including mental health issues, family instability, and poverty. These challenges contribute to school disengagement and early school leaving, which in turn increase the number of young people classified as not in education, employment, or training (NEET youth). Integrating youth work within school curricula is therefore critical in ensuring continuity of psychosocial support, building resilience, and strengthening young people's skills to navigate these challenges (National Youth Agency, 2023).

In South Africa, youth work practice has increasingly gained attention within the public sector and policy discourse, having previously been largely confined to faith-based and community-based organisations. This growing recognition has resulted in some universities offering qualifications in youth development (National Youth Policy, 2009). Despite these developments, youth work in South Africa remains largely unrecognised and unregulated as a profession. For youth work to be implemented effectively and sustainably, there is a clear need for its formal recognition and professional regulation (Chauke, 2026). Nonetheless, youth work activities continue to be implemented through government initiatives in partnership with various stakeholders, including non-profit organisations (Chauke, 2020). These organisations play a significant role within formal education settings, particularly in addressing youth sexual and reproductive health through life skills and health education programmes. However, youth workers operating in schools often encounter challenges, including marginalisation and unfair treatment by teachers and the school management team (Chauke, 2024).

The South African government has adopted a dual financing model to support youth work practices. This model involves funding from the National Treasury to national, provincial, and local government structures responsible for implementing youth development interventions, as well as funding provided to non-profit organisations through partnerships. The National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), established under Act 54 of 2008, is mandated to coordinate youth development initiatives across these sectors (National Youth Policy, 2021). Youth work in formal education in South Africa is also implemented through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI), particularly the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI). Through this initiative, more than 320,000 young people under the age of 35 have been deployed in formal education settings, where they assist teachers

with lesson preparation, learner supervision, and classroom discipline, key components aligned with youth work practice in school contexts (Department of Basic Education, 2025).

While youth workers in South Africa complement formal education through after-school programmes and life skills initiatives, youth work practice remains largely absent from the formal school curriculum (Chauke, 2022). At the same time, South African schools face persistent challenges related to youth violence and behavioural problems, which negatively affect young people's developmental needs, educational aspirations, and school retention, often resulting in dropout (Chauke, 2021). Integrating youth work into school curricula therefore presents a viable strategy for supporting teachers and reducing youth violence, while promoting positive youth development within school environments. Despite policy-level recognition of the importance of youth work in promoting holistic youth development in South Africa (National Youth Policy, 2021; National Youth Development Agency, 2022), there remains limited research and policy attention on the role of youth workers within formal education. In particular, there is a scarcity of empirical evidence examining the extent to which youth work practice within schools contributes to young persons' personal and academic development, as well as the challenges youth workers face in these contexts. As a result, youth workers in formal education settings are often required to perform roles traditionally associated with teachers, limiting their ability to implement youth work practices that foster positive youth development. Therefore, this study advocates for greater policy attention to emphasise and support the integration of youth work in South African schools.

Although previous studies in the South African context have explored the potential integration of youth work into school curricula (Chauke, 2021; Chauke, 2022), these studies did not examine the perceptions, lived experiences, or everyday practices of youth workers operating within formal education settings. A related study by McKay and Osman (2025) evaluated the integration of youth work in South African schools through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative, with specific reference to the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI). However, this study relied primarily on desktop research and did not capture youth workers' perspectives, thereby limiting a comprehensive understanding of youth work integration from the standpoint of those directly involved in practice. This study addresses this methodological gap by exploring the lived experiences of youth workers in formal education settings in South Africa through a qualitative approach. Specifically, it investigates youth workers' perceived roles in fostering learners' social development, as well as the systemic and practical challenges they encounter within school environments through direct interaction with youth workers. While some individuals working in schools through employment initiatives may not formally identify as youth workers or possess qualifications in youth development, they nonetheless perform functions consistent with youth work practice. For the purposes of this study, these individuals are therefore regarded as youth workers based on the nature and scope of their roles within formal education settings. In addition to addressing a methodological gap, this study also responds to a geographical gap in the literature. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no prior study has examined this topic concurrently in both Khayelitsha (Western Cape) and Malamulele (Limpopo Province). This gap informed the rationale for this study. By incorporating perspectives from youth workers operating in both township and rural contexts, the study provides contextually nuanced insights that contribute meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on youth workers involved in the teacher assistant programme implemented through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative in partnership with the Department of Basic Education. By foregrounding youth workers' voices and lived experiences within their social and institutional contexts, this study

contributes to a deeper understanding of youth work integration in South African schools. The study is guided by the following objectives: (1) to explore the lived experiences of youth workers in rural formal education settings in South Africa, with particular emphasis on their perceived roles in fostering learners' personal and academic development; and (2) to identify and analyse the systemic and practical challenges encountered by youth workers in fulfilling their roles within formal education contexts. These objectives are addressed through the following research questions: How do youth workers in South African formal education settings perceive and experience their role in supporting learners' personal and academic development? What systemic and practical challenges do youth workers encounter in fulfilling their roles within formal education environments? Although the South African government has initiated the integration of youth work into schools through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative, a clear policy framework guiding the formal integration of youth work into school curricula remains absent. This study therefore seeks to contribute to policy development by providing evidence-based insights that support the formal integration of youth work into South African school curricula. Furthermore, given the limited empirical research on youth workers' roles and challenges within formal education, the findings of this study aim not only to document these experiences but also to propose practical solutions that can strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of youth work integration in South African schools.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Youth Work as Community Education in South Africa

[Chauke et al. \(2021\)](#) argue that youth participation in South Africa is frequently driven by an altruistic commitment to addressing systemic societal issues rather than mere personal advancement. This suggests that youth work functions as a pedagogical tool for civic consciousness, where the curriculum is the immediate struggle of the community. This was most visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, where youth-led initiatives served as a critical frontline for public health education. As [Chauke \(2020\)](#) observes, young people occupied public spaces to disseminate life-saving information, effectively acting as informal educators and filling gaps left by traditional institutional communication. The efficacy of community education is further evidenced in the rise of youth-led peer education models. [Vostanis et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight that these initiatives are particularly potent in addressing the mental health crisis within South African communities. By decentralising professional expertise and placing it in the hands of peers, these programs foster a culture of communal wellbeing that is more culturally resonant and accessible than clinical interventions alone. This aligns with earlier assertions by [Tshabalala \(1999\)](#), who posits that youth workers facilitate empowerment by fostering a culture of learning through creative, non-formal methodologies that target vulnerable youth in poor communities. These interventions challenge the traditional power dynamics inherent in youth development. By placing young people at the center of the youth work activity as important stakeholders. This transition is fundamental; it acknowledges that young people are not merely adults-in-waiting or helpless recipients of aid but are essential contributors to the democratic and social fabric of the nation. Consequently, youth work as community education in South Africa serves as a transformative mechanism that bridges the gap between individual agency and collective liberation.

1.1.2. International Context: Youth Work Practice in Formal Education

Traditionally, youth work has been conceptualised as a practice operating outside formal education settings, often during the leisure time of young people. However, the increasing prevalence of socio-economic challenges confronting young people, many of

which negatively affect their learning capacity, has necessitated the integration of youth work into formal education systems. This shift recognises youth work as an approach capable of addressing diverse learning needs, particularly for learners who experience barriers to learning and require additional, differentiated support (Almeida & Morais, 2024). In the Global North, countries such as the United Kingdom have increasingly integrated youth work practices into formal education. Evidence from these contexts suggests that such integration has yielded positive outcomes for young people's personal and educational development (Millard & Diggle, 2024). Similarly, Cooper et al. (2014) argue that youth work practice in Australia aligns closely with education, as both are fundamentally concerned with the holistic development of young people. While formal education often focuses on academic achievement, youth work engages more deeply with young people's personal, social, and emotional development. Consequently, the integration of youth work within formal education is increasingly recognised as a vital component of positive youth development (Sonneveld et al., 2021).

The educational approach underpinning youth work emphasises the development of reflective and critical thinking skills, which are essential for personal growth and the promotion of lifelong learning. For such learning processes to be effective, a foundation of trust between youth workers and young people is essential, and this relationship must be grounded in voluntary participation and mutual respect (Williams, 2025). Howard et al. (2024) further contend that integrating youth work into formal education is crucial for young people's development, as youth workers play a significant role in fostering positive relationships between learners and teachers within school environments. Empirical evidence from Wales demonstrates that the integration of youth work into formal education has produced positive outcomes, particularly through discussion-based activities that equip young people with essential life skills (Seal & Chivers, 2025). Similarly, in Finland, youth work has gained significant attention within school settings, with youth workers strategically placed according to specific school needs. These school-based youth workers have successfully designed interventions aimed at preventing bullying and promoting social cohesion among learners (Kiilakoski et al., 2025).

1.1.3. South African Context: Youth Work Practice in Formal Education

In contrast to these Global North contexts, youth work in formal education in South Africa has not yet received comparable levels of attention or institutional recognition. Nevertheless, through initiatives such as the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative, the South African government has invested in youth work by placing young people in schools to support teachers with academic assistance, with the aim of improving learners' educational outcomes (Department of Basic Education, 2025). McKay and Osman (2025) argue that the integration of youth work into formal education in South Africa holds significant potential for improving educational attainment, particularly because youth workers are able to invest time in building relationships with learners, an aspect often constrained for teachers due to curriculum demands and workload pressures.

1.1.4. International Context: Youth Work Practice and Young People's Social and Personal Development

Professional youth workers operating within school environments contribute positively to young people's personal development and collaborate effectively with other support professionals. Their influence often extends beyond learners to include families, thereby strengthening relationships between households and formal education institutions (Williams, 2025). Brady et al. (2022) emphasise that participation in youth work enhances young people's sense of self-worth, personal agency, emotional regulation, communication abilities, and social competence, while also fostering problem-solving skills that are central

to holistic development. Across countries such as Greece, Finland, Estonia, and Portugal, the integration of youth work into formal education has been shown to enhance young people's sense of belonging. Youth work activities such as storytelling, group discussions, and team-building exercises enable learners to overcome social barriers encountered both within school environments and in their communities (Pantazidis & Pechtelidis, 2025). Kivijärvi et al. (2025) argue that the integration of youth work into Finland's formal education system possesses the potential to mitigate school-based violence, including bullying, by fostering more inclusive environments.

Structured non-formal education, particularly high-quality after-school initiatives, substantially improves academic and developmental trajectories for youth. Seitz et al. (2022) argue that the efficacy of STEM-focused after-school programmes relies heavily on organisational quality; well-executed programmes yield significantly higher grades compared to non-participation. Expanding this scope to early childhood, Vandell and Simpkins (2024) demonstrate that organised interventions starting in kindergarten drive long-term success. Crucially, they identify social and behavioral development as the primary mechanism that enhances young people's capability and boosts academic performance. Beyond immediate academic gains, non-formal education serves as a vital structural intervention to mitigate systemic inequities. In the United States, programmes targeting youth of Color and at-risk populations yield profound socio-economic benefits. Phillippi et al. (2021) demonstrate that these targeted interventions not only elevate academic outcomes but also actively reduce poverty and improve long-term employability. Collectively, the literature establishes that structured non-formal education is a high-leverage tool essential for advancing educational equity and economic mobility among marginalised youth.

1.1.5. South African Context: Youth Work Practice and Young People's Academic, Social and Personal Development

In some contexts, youth work has been framed primarily as a mechanism for improving school performance. For example, in Ireland, policy positions youth work largely as a tool for addressing academic underachievement, rather than recognising it as a distinct educational approach with its own methods and values (Department of Education, 2013). As a result, youth work is often perceived as a functional support for raising academic standards, rather than as an independent practice that offers alternative pathways for learning and development. Despite these tensions, empirical evidence suggests that youth work contributes meaningfully to learners' academic development. In South Africa, McKay and Osman (2025) report that schools which have integrated youth work practices have experienced improvements in educational achievement, including enhanced learning outcomes, improved attendance, and reduced classroom disruptions. The presence of youth workers also alleviates teachers' workload pressures and creates space for innovative pedagogical approaches. Importantly, youth work offers a supportive and non-intrusive approach that prioritises learners' social and emotional wellbeing, strengthens transferable skills, and raises educational aspirations. By providing flexible and voluntary learning spaces, youth work bridges gaps within formal education and promotes learner agency (Chauke, 2019). Furthermore, youth workers support learners in developing computer literacy and teamwork skills, which enhance self-esteem, academic performance, and confidence in classroom participation. These findings are reinforced by Brady et al. (2022), who highlight that engagement in youth work increases learners' motivation towards schoolwork, improves academic performance, and positively influences career aspirations. In the South African context, Chauke (2019) demonstrates that participation in youth work equips young people with critical life skills, including resilience, self-control, and the capacity to resist negative influences. These competencies are particularly significant for young people's social and personal development within contexts characterised by socio-economic adversity.

1.1.6. International Context: Challenges of Youth Work Practice in Formal Education

Despite the recognised value of youth work in schools, several challenges continue to hinder its effective implementation. Youth work remains underfunded, which has a serious negative impact on the implementation of youth work activities (Pope, 2016; Petkovic, 2022). Keogh et al. (2018) stress that the roles of youth workers and teachers in implementing sexual health interventions in formal education are not clearly defined, which creates conflict between these two professions. Howard et al. (2024) note that although teachers acknowledge the contributions of youth workers, persistent barriers remain in partnership working. In particular, the failure to recognise school-based youth workers as equal professional partners rather than as supplementary or external service providers has resulted in challenges related to information sharing, access to learners, and the availability of appropriate spaces for youth work practice. Comparative evidence highlights stark differences across national contexts. In Finland and Estonia, youth work is well-structured, formally recognised, and fully integrated into education systems. In these contexts, youth work is state-funded, and youth workers collaborate effectively with teachers, resulting in minimal professional conflict (Pantazidis & Pechtelidis, 2025). Conversely, in countries such as Greece and Portugal, youth work in schools lacks formal recognition and is predominantly delivered by non-governmental organisations, making its impact more difficult to evaluate and sustain.

1.1.7. South African Context: Challenges of Youth Work Practice in Formal Education

Similar challenges found in the international community are evident in South Africa. Chauke (2024) reports that youth work in formal education is often implemented through non-profit organisations, particularly in areas such as sexual and reproductive health education. Youth workers in these contexts frequently struggle to implement effective interventions due to a lack of recognition from teachers regarding their professional expertise. These challenges are further exacerbated by the absence of formal professional recognition and regulation of youth work in South Africa, limiting its legitimacy and integration within formal education systems.

The most dominant body of empirical research on the state-funded integration of youth work within formal education is concentrated in the Global North. Such research remains scarce in contexts such as South Africa, where the schooling system continues to experience challenges including school dropout, teenage pregnancy, and school violence. Consequently, the present study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the impact of integrating youth work into formal education, as well as the challenges associated with its implementation.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by empowerment theory, originally pioneered by Julian Rapoport in the late 1970s. Empowerment theory emerged within the field of psychology as a framework aimed at enhancing individuals' psychological well-being and enabling them to realise their full potential (Zimmerman, 2005). The theory emphasises processes through which individuals and groups gain control over decisions and actions that shape their lives. Empowerment theory has since been widely applied in professions concerned with social change, including education and social work, as it provides a conceptual lens for understanding how individuals can be supported to actively influence their own life circumstances (Joseph, 2020). Within these fields, empowerment is viewed not merely as an outcome, but as an ongoing process that strengthens agency, participation, and self-determination. In this study, empowerment theory is employed to understand the role of youth workers as agents of empowerment within formal education in South Africa,

particularly in fostering young people's social, personal, and academic development. The theory provides a useful framework for analysing how youth workers facilitate empowerment processes that promote resilience, critical awareness, and self-efficacy among young people in schools. Furthermore, empowerment theory is used to interrogate the structural and institutional challenges faced by youth workers within formal education. From this perspective, the study argues that many of these challenges can be addressed through the full empowerment of youth workers by the state, particularly through supportive policy formulation and implementation. When adequately empowered, youth workers are better positioned to contribute meaningfully to learner development and educational outcomes. Empowerment is therefore central to youth work practice within formal educational settings. Empowerment-oriented youth work supports young people in gaining active control over their educational and personal trajectories by fostering participatory decision-making, agency, and confidence. In this context, schools function as structured and enabling spaces in which youth workers can support young people's strengths, encourage proactive engagement, and promote meaningful participation in both academic and personal development (McKay & Osman, 2025).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of youth workers in formal education in South Africa. A qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding social phenomena through participants' experiences while minimising researcher bias (Lim, 2024). It enables an in-depth examination of how youth workers interpret their roles, contributions to young people's personal development, academic development and the challenges they encounter within formal education. Given the focus on lived experience, a phenomenological research design was employed to capture the essence of the phenomenon as expressed through participants' thoughts, feelings, and meanings (McLeod, 2024).

2.2. Sampling Technique and Study Setting

Participants comprise individuals selected from a target population when it is not feasible to study the entire population. This study comprised 22 youth workers, 7 males and 15 females, selected through purposive sampling, a technique used to identify individuals with relevant knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were youth workers who are currently employed in formal education and those whose contract has expired as youth workers in schools. Ten participants were drawn from the Western Cape and 12 from Limpopo Province to capture diverse linguistic and contextual perspectives, including Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, and isiXhosa speakers. The Western Cape was selected due to reported incidents of school violence, while Limpopo was chosen because of high rates of teenage pregnancy, allowing exploration of context-specific youth work practices addressing these social challenges. The inclusion criteria required participants to be between 18 and 35 years of age and to be practising youth workers, or to have practised youth work for a minimum of 2 months in schools under the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative, implemented in partnership with the Department of Basic Education in South Africa, in either Limpopo or the Western Cape Province. Individuals who did not meet these criteria were excluded from participation in the study.

2.3. Data Collection and Procedure

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. First, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 youth workers, and two other youth workers based in Limpopo Province shared their narrative responses to the first author through WhatsApp text. The first author was familiar with these participants, who are practising and those who practiced youth work in schools. Second, a face-to-face data collection process was conducted in the Western Cape Province with 10 youth workers by a trained research assistant who is also a youth worker. The research assistant was appointed to minimise the costs associated with the first author travelling from Limpopo to the Western Cape. The research assistant was familiar with youth workers involved in formal education settings in the Khayelitsha area and interviewed them. Open-ended questions in both interview settings were used to allow participants to express their views freely, without judgement or interpretation by the researchers or the research assistant. Interviews were conducted individually and were expected to last approximately 30–35 min. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Table 1 presents the semi-structured interview questions used in the study. While these questions were pre-determined, follow-up questions were asked where necessary to clarify or expand on participants' responses.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Interview Guide Questions	
•	How do you define and understand your roles and responsibilities within formal education settings, and to what extent do these roles foster young people's academic and personal development?
•	How do you experience collaboration with teachers to enhance youth personal and academic development in schools?
•	What are the systematic challenges that you experience in formal education that affect your work?
•	What recommendations do you propose for improving role clarity, institutional support, and the integration of youth work within formal education settings in South Africa?

2.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, which is widely recognised as an appropriate method in qualitative research due to its effectiveness in analysing individuals' lived experiences (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). This approach was suitable for the present study as it enables the researchers to identify and interpret patterns of meaning emerging from participants' narratives. Although Braun and Clarke (2021) propose six phases of thematic analysis, this study adopted the data analysis steps outlined by Creswell (2014). First, the data were prepared for analysis by listening to the audio-recorded interviews and transcribing them verbatim into Word documents. Second, the transcribed data were read repeatedly to identify relevant information and eliminate redundancy, with particular attention given to addressing the research questions. Third, initial codes were organised into broader, meaningful themes by identifying recurring patterns in the data. Fourth, themes sharing similar meanings were reviewed and regrouped accordingly. Finally, a narrative report was developed, in which the identified themes are discussed in detail and supported by participants' verbatim quotations.

2.5. Trustworthiness

The quality and authenticity of the study's findings were ensured through the application of four main trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement and peer debriefing. A third person with extensive experience in youth studies was involved to

verify the findings by comparing them against the original dataset. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the research setting and participant demographics, including educational backgrounds, gender, and race. This level of detail enabled other researchers to make informed judgments about the applicability of the findings to their own contexts. Dependability was ensured through the same third-person verification process. Confirmability was reinforced by including direct quotes from participants.

2.6. Ethics

Ethics was at the centre of this study; first, the first author obtained ethical approval from the College of Education Research Ethics Committee at the University of South Africa on 15 February 2026 with the Ref #12542. Once ethical approval was granted, the first author identified the participants. The first author and research assist explain the aim of the study to the participants and highlighted its importance; then, the participants signed the consent forms. Participants were informed that participation in the study is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time they wish to. The participants’ real names were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and their privacy were further safeguarded, with all information being shared will be being used solely for the purposes of this study. Grammarly, an AI tool, was used only for grammar editing in this study’s manuscript.

3. Results

This section presents the findings on the lived experiences of youth workers in South African schools. The participant bibliography reflects a predominantly young people aged between 20 and 33 years, with a slight majority of females, drawn mainly from Western Cape and Limpopo provinces. Most participants possess between six months and three years of experience, with the majority having at least a Grade 12 qualification, while others hold diplomas and degrees in fields such as Youth Development, Engineering, and Social Sciences. Employment status varies, with some engaged as youth workers, educator assistants, and students, although a significant proportion, particularly from Limpopo, are unemployed. Nearly all participants are single, with only one married individual, and sample is entirely African. Table 2 shows the participants’ bibliography.

Table 2. Participants bibliography.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Province	Experience	Education	Marital Status	Ethnic Group
Jack	Male	21	Western Cape	1 year	Grade 12 (Matric)	Single	African
Sipho	Male	20	Western Cape	1 year	Diploma (Engineering)	Single	African
Seii	Female	32	Limpopo	2 years	BA Youth Development & PGCE	Single	African
Selina	Female	30	Western Cape	6 months	BA Youth Development	Single	African
Nakari	Male	23	Western Cape	1 year	National Diploma in Youth Development	Single	African
Nax	Female	21	Western Cape	1 year	Grade 12 (Matric)	Single	African
Renny	Female	22	Western Cape	3 years	Grade 12 (Matric)	Single	African
Depy	Male	23	Western Cape	1.5 years	Grade 12 (Matric)	Single	African
Depay	Male	22	Western Cape	2 years	Matric/Nature Conservation Student	Single	African
Jerry	Male	21	Western Cape	5 months	Bachelor of Paralegal Studies	Single	African
Celina	Female	25	Limpopo	1 year	BA Youth Development	Single	African
Vaku	Female	26	Limpopo	1 year	BA Youth Development	Single	African
Nandi	Female	22	Western Cape	3 months	Grade 12/Education Training	Single	African
Nombi	Female	33	Limpopo	11 months	Youth Development	Married	African
Nani	Male	24	Limpopo	1 year	Diploma (Engineering)	Single	African

Table 2. *Cont.*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Province	Experience	Education	Marital Status	Ethnic Group
Nathi	Male	23	Limpopo	18 months	Travel and Tourism	Single	African
Kari	Female	22	Limpopo	1 year	Travel and Tourism	Single	African
Lover	Female	26	Limpopo	1 year	Development Studies	Single	African
Nozazi	Female	25	Limpopo	1 year	International Relations	Single	African
Zazi	Female	20	Limpopo	1 year	Grade 12 (Matric)	Single	African
Shine	Female	27	Limpopo	1 year	Youth Development	Single	African
Thulie	Female	22	Limpopo	6 months	Media Studies	Single	African

Two central superordinate themes were found in this study, with each having sub-themes. The first superordinate theme is the functional and experiential dimension of youth workers in South African schools; the following subtheme emerged in this superordinate theme, namely, psychosocial support. The second superordinate theme is barriers hindering the effective implementation of youth work activities in South African schools.

3.1. Functional and Experiential Dimensions of Youth Workers in South African Schools

This superordinate theme shows the roles performed by youth workers within formal education environments in South African schools. The findings indicate that these roles are multifaceted and development-oriented, contributing significantly to both the academic and personal development of young people. Participants' accounts highlight the embedded and relational nature of youth work, demonstrating how youth workers function as key support agents within the schooling system.

3.1.1. Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support came out as one of the central functions performed by youth workers in schools. Participants emphasised that young people encounter a range of everyday life challenges that negatively affect their academic performance. These challenges include bereavement, family instability, and peer-related pressures, all of which necessitate targeted emotional and social support within the educational context. Participants highlighted that their role involves providing low-intensity, preventative psychosocial care, aimed at strengthening learners' resilience and emotional well-being. This includes addressing diverse personal needs and equipping learners with coping strategies to navigate life difficulties. As one participant explained:

"I provide emotional counseling such as guiding a learner through grief after a family loss, conflict mediation in playground disputes, and wellbeing guidance through weekly feelings check-ins, creating a supportive environment for personal growth." (Kari, 22-year-old female, Limpopo Province)

Similarly, another participant described a combination of individual and group-based interventions:

"I offer psychosocial counselling sessions, life skills workshops on resilience, for example, group sessions on coping with peer pressure, emotional intelligence, mentoring, and peer support groups that discuss real-life challenges like family issues. This helps them to stop overthinking and focus on their studies." (Nombi, 33-year-old female, Limpopo Province)

These accounts illustrate that youth workers adopt a holistic and preventative approach to learner support. Rather than viewing young people as problems to be fixed,

participants demonstrated a strengths-based orientation, focusing on building resilience, emotional intelligence, and social connectedness. The use of peer support groups further reflects an emphasis on collaborative learning and shared experiences, where learners are encouraged to support one another. The findings suggest that psychosocial support provided by youth workers plays a critical role in mitigating the impact of personal and social challenges on learners' academic engagement. By creating safe and supportive spaces, youth workers enable learners to process their experiences, develop coping mechanisms, and ultimately refocus on their educational goals. Peer-led structures within this psychosocial framework used in youth work practice within the school environment directly reflect the philosophy of Ubuntu, the African ethos that a person is a person through other persons. When participants like Nombi establish peer support groups to navigate family issues, they shift the focus from individualistic psychological therapy to a model of collective healing and shared responsibility.

3.1.2. Mental Health Support

This sub-theme highlights the critical role played by youth workers in promoting and supporting learners' mental health within formal school settings. While closely related to psychosocial support, participants made a clear distinction by emphasising mental health as an area that remains largely under-addressed in schools, despite its growing importance in young people's lives. Participants indicated that many learners experience psychological challenges such as stress related to academic performance, low self-esteem, and negative self-perceptions. These challenges often go unnoticed or insufficiently addressed within formal education systems. As a result, youth workers position themselves as accessible and trusted support figures, providing a safe space for learners to express their concerns. One participant explained:

"I provide these young people with mental health support since schools are not paying much attention to these things, especially those who are stressed with their education, feeling like they are not performing well, and those who have low self-esteem and believe they are not beautiful enough. These kids find it easier to talk to me than teachers. After talking to them, I begin to see changes in their lives, as they start to develop confidence." (Renny, 22-year-old female, Western Cape Province)

This account highlights the relational advantage youth workers hold, as learners often perceive them as more approachable than teachers. The ability to build trust enables youth workers to engage learners in meaningful conversations that contribute to improved self-confidence and emotional well-being.

Similarly, another participant emphasised the importance of non-judgmental listening and emotional validation as key strategies in supporting learners' mental health:

"I listen non-judgmentally when learners need to talk, help them manage stress by normalising their feelings, and encourage them to seek professional help when issues are beyond what I can offer." (Sipho, 20-year-old, Western Cape Province)

This response reflects an awareness of both the scope and limitations of youth work practice. While youth workers provide immediate mental health support, they also play a crucial role in referral pathways, guiding learners toward professional services when necessary. By offering safe, non-judgmental spaces and fostering open communication, they contribute to the normalisation of mental health discussions among young people. This not only enhances learners' emotional well-being but also supports their personal development and capacity to engage effectively in their academic work.

3.1.3. Addressing Antisocial Behaviour and Promoting Healthy Behaviour

Participants during the interview reported to be playing a significant role in addressing antisocial behaviour and promoting positive behavioural change within school environments. Participants reported that schools in which they worked were often characterised by high levels of antisocial behaviour, including bullying, smoking, and physical fighting among learners. These behaviours were identified by teachers, school governing bodies, and parents as contributing factors to poor academic performance and a negative school climate. In response to these challenges, participants described adopting collaborative and programmatic interventions, often working closely with Life Orientation (LO) teachers and other stakeholders to design and implement behaviour change initiatives. These programmes were aimed at raising awareness about the consequences of antisocial behaviour while promoting healthy and socially acceptable ways of interacting. One participant explained:

“I was working in an under-resourced school where learners would fight, bully one another, and even bully teachers. I came up with the idea of working with some LO teachers to develop youth work activities where we could raise awareness about the effects of such behaviour on their future and teach them through extracurricular activities like storytelling how to live well with others. After this initiative, we witnessed change in our school. Learners began to show discipline and started to perform well in their studies.” (Celina, 25-year-old female, Limpopo Province)

This account highlights the use of experiential and participatory approaches, such as storytelling and extracurricular engagement, to foster behavioural transformation. It also demonstrates the link between improved behaviour and enhanced academic outcomes. The use of extracurricular storytelling fosters behavioral transformation that offers a concrete example of the African tradition of community education. Unlike Western, punitive approaches to school discipline that isolate the individual troublemaker, storytelling operates as a culturally embedded tool for collective moral and social development. Similarly, participants reported implementing targeted interventions to address specific risk behaviours, such as substance use. One participant described collaborating with external stakeholders, including law enforcement, to address smoking among learners:

“We used to have activities working with police officers in our school to raise awareness of the dangers of smoking within the school environment. Within a month, we saw progress; some learners were no longer smoking on school premises, and they even started to behave better in the classroom.” (Depay, 22-year-old male, Western Cape Province)

The quote above shows the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement as a core youth work strategy. By involving external actors such as police officers, participants were able to reinforce behavioural messages and enhance the credibility and impact of their interventions. This suggests that participants employ a preventative, collaborative, and educational approach to addressing antisocial behaviour. Through awareness programmes and structured activities, they create opportunities for young people to reflect on their actions and adopt healthier behaviours. These interventions not only contribute to improved discipline within the school environment but also support learners' personal development and academic engagement, thereby reinforcing the broader goals of positive youth development within formal education settings.

3.2. Barriers Hindering the Effective Implementation of Youth Work Activities in South African Schools

While participants highlighted the positive impact of youth work activities on learners' academic and personal development, the findings also reveal that youth workers face multiple challenges that hinder the effective implementation of these interventions. This superordinate theme captures the structural and contextual barriers experienced within school environments, which limit the full potential of youth work practice in formal education.

3.2.1. Operational Issues

Data indicate that operational challenges are a significant barrier to the effective delivery of youth work programmes in schools. Although youth workers' primary objective is to mainstream positive youth development within formal education, participants reported that they are frequently constrained by unclear roles, competing responsibilities, and limited institutional support. Participants expressed concern that, instead of focusing on designing and implementing youth work activities that support learners' holistic development, they are often required to perform multiple and sometimes unrelated tasks, including duties typically assigned to teachers or administrative staff. This role ambiguity not only affects their productivity but also undermines the effectiveness of their interventions. As one participant explained:

"Unclear expectations cause confusion; for example, being asked to substitute for a teacher reduces credibility when implementing programmes like anti-bullying interventions." (Nombi, 33-year-old female, Limpopo Province)

This highlights how role conflict and ambiguity can weaken the authority and legitimacy of youth workers when engaging learners in developmental programmes.

Similarly, another participant emphasized the challenge of managing diverse responsibilities within limited timeframes:

"It can be very challenging to work effectively when you are doing many tasks, as you have to be an assistant, organise documentation and administrative tasks, and then become a student counsellor at the same time. Time management is very critical, and if not managed, it's impossible to perform effectively." (Seii, 32-year-old female, Limpopo Province)

This account reflects the burden of workload and role overload, which limits the capacity of youth workers to deliver focused and high-quality interventions.

In addition, participants pointed to structural gaps, particularly the absence of clear job descriptions and professional recognition. One participant noted:

"Unclear job descriptions cause confusion about boundaries and expectations, making it hard to measure impact. Low professional recognition, such as lack of certification or career pathways, can reduce motivation and influence how colleagues perceive the youth worker's expertise." (Celina, 25-year-old female, Limpopo Province)

This suggests that youth work within formal education is not yet fully institutionalised as a recognised profession, which negatively affects both its implementation and perceived value. Overall, the findings demonstrate that operational issues such as role ambiguity, workload pressures, and lack of professional recognition significantly undermine the effectiveness of youth work in schools. These challenges not only constrain programme implementation but also impact youth workers' motivation and professional identity, ultimately limiting their ability to contribute optimally to learners' academic and personal development.

3.2.2. Lack of Funding and Limited Time Allocation for Youth Work Activities

The data also show that lack of funding and limited time allocation are significant barriers to the effective implementation of youth work activities in schools. Participants reported that youth work programmes often operate without dedicated budgets, which restricts their ability to design and implement meaningful interventions. This financial constraint is further compounded by a lack of institutional support, where youth workers are not fully recognised as integral contributors to the school environment. Participants indicated that, in many cases, teachers perceive youth workers as volunteers rather than professionals, which contributes to the marginalisation of their role. As a result, youth work activities are not prioritised within the school timetable, and youth workers are frequently assigned administrative duties that fall outside the scope of their professional practice. One participant explained:

“Teachers do not value our work; we are seen as volunteers. No budget is allocated for us so we can effectively engage young people.” (Sipho, 20-year-old male, Western Cape Province)

This perception not only limits access to resources but also undermines the legitimacy of youth work within formal education settings.

“Because teachers spend the bulk of the day with the learners, I often have to improvise and fit sessions in between their classes. This might mean asking teachers to release learners which disrupts their schedules or meeting after school, which impacts the learners’ transport and personal time. It’s a constant balancing act to ensure they get the support they need without compromising their academic progress” (Vaku, a 26-year-old female, Limpopo province)

Vaku’s account highlights a power imbalance within formal education, where youth work is treated as secondary to academic activities. This marginalisation leads youth workers to feel as though they are intruding on teachers’ schedules, limiting their ability to implement programmes during school hours. As a result, youth workers are often forced to conduct activities after school, when learners are tired and less willing to participate. This reduces the effectiveness of youth work interventions and limits meaningful engagement. Additionally, working outside formal hours places extra demands on youth workers, contributing to increased workload and potential burnout.

Similarly, another participant highlighted the broader systemic nature of this challenge:

“We are not respected in schools by teachers; they do not even care if we suggest designing team-building activities for youth. But I don’t blame them this is a Department of Education issue, because schools are seen as spaces where learners focus on the curriculum to pass to the next grade, with little interest in the development of the whole person. This issue requires policy intervention so our work can be taken seriously.” (Jack, 21-year-old male, Western Cape Province)

Jack’s account exemplifies a policy and structural gap in the integration of youth work within formal education. The prioritisation of educational outcomes over holistic development limits opportunities for youth workers to implement programmes that support learners’ social and personal growth. Furthermore, participants suggested that the lack of formal recognition and resource allocation directly affects the time available for youth work activities. Without designated time within the school schedule, youth workers are unable to consistently engage learners in developmental programmes, thereby reducing the potential impact of their work. These challenges are not only organisational but also systemic, reflecting a broader policy gap in recognising and integrating youth work as a critical component of learner development. Addressing these barriers will require policy-level

interventions, increased funding, and a shift towards valuing holistic youth development alongside academic achievement.

4. Discussion

4.1. *Functional and Experiential Dimensions of Youth Workers in South African Schools*

The present study explored the lived experiences of youth workers within formal education in the Limpopo Province and the Western Cape, with a particular focus on how their roles contribute to young people's development. The findings indicate that youth workers perform multifaceted roles that extend beyond academic support to include personal and social development. This suggests that schools are not only sites of academic learning but also critical spaces for holistic youth development. This interpretation aligns with previous studies conducted in European contexts, which emphasise the importance of school-based support personnel in fostering young people's overall development and academic success (YouthLink Scotland, 2024; Millard & Diggle, 2024; Cooper et al., 2014). However, unlike these studies, which tend to foreground structured educational support, the present findings highlight a more integrated and context-responsive role shaped by the socio-economic realities of South African youth.

Our findings further revealed that youth workers engage with young people facing complex socio-economic challenges, including bereavement, family instability, and peer pressure, all of which negatively affect educational outcomes. This finding illustrates the interconnectedness of social conditions and academic performance. In response, youth workers provide psychosocial support through low-intensity interventions aimed at strengthening resilience, emotional well-being, and adaptive coping strategies. This reflects a preventative and developmental approach rather than a purely remedial one. Consistent with the National Youth Agency (2023), such support equips young people with essential life skills to navigate adversity, thereby enhancing both personal and social development. The emphasis on early, accessible support also explains how youth workers are able to alleviate immediate distress while simultaneously promoting long-term developmental outcomes. The findings further reveal that these practices are closely aligned with empowerment theory, as youth workers facilitate a sense of agency, belonging, and control among young people. Through ongoing engagement, young people are supported to make informed decisions and develop confidence in managing their own lives. This empowerment-oriented approach contrasts with findings from contexts such as Ireland, where youth workers are primarily positioned as support to teachers in addressing academic underperformance, with less emphasis on holistic development (Department of Education, 2013). A similar trend is observable in South Africa's policy landscape, particularly within the Department of Basic Education (2025) initiatives, where youth workers are often utilised to support curriculum delivery and lesson preparation. While these approaches recognise the value of youth workers, they appear to underplay their role in promoting mental health and well-being. In contrast, the present study demonstrates that youth workers actively address mental health as a central component of their practice. Youth workers described engaging young people in both one-on-one and group sessions, creating safe spaces for dialogue, emotional expression, and self-reflection. This not only fosters self-confidence but also contributes to improved emotional well-being, which is essential for academic engagement and success. The inclusion of referral pathways to specialised services further illustrates a continuum of care, ensuring that young people receive appropriate support when issues exceed the scope of school-based interventions. This finding extends existing literature by positioning mental health promotion as integral, rather than peripheral, to youth work in schools.

Another key finding relates to the prevalence of antisocial behaviour, including bullying, substance use, and violence, within the school environments. Youth workers in our study highlighted these behaviours as significant barriers to young people's academic achievement and positive school climate. In response, youth workers design and implement targeted interventions aimed at promoting behavioural change. These initiatives are largely educational, focusing on raising awareness about the consequences of such behaviours while encouraging positive alternatives. This aligns with previous studies (De Baat et al., 2014; Sarti et al., 2019; Kiilakoski et al., 2025), which highlight the role of school-based youth workers in supporting behaviour management and fostering constructive relationships between learners and educators. However, our study adds a critical dimension by demonstrating the collaborative nature of these interventions. Youth workers reported working not only with teachers but also with external stakeholders such as law enforcement agencies to address antisocial behaviour. This multi-stakeholder approach reflects a more comprehensive strategy that acknowledges the broader social context influencing learner behaviour. The involvement of police officers, for instance, may serve both preventative and educational purposes, although it also raises important questions about the balance between support and surveillance in school environments. This nuanced approach is less evident in previous studies, thereby representing a key contribution to the literature. Importantly, efforts to address antisocial behaviour were also framed within an empowerment perspective. By raising awareness and modelling positive behaviour, youth workers enable young people to make informed choices and resist negative influences. This process reinforces the principles of empowerment theory, where individuals are supported to take control of their lives and act in ways that promote their well-being. As noted by Joseph (2020), such empowerment is critical in fostering resilience and reducing engagement in risky behaviours. In this study, empowerment is not treated as an abstract concept but as a practical outcome of sustained interaction, guidance, and support within the school context.

4.2. Barriers Hindering the Effective Implementation of Youth Work Activities in South African Schools

While youth workers play an important role in supporting the development of young people in South African schools, our findings reveal a range of operational issues that constrain the effective implementation of youth work activities in South African schools. The study revealed youth workers consistently experienced role ambiguity, excessive workload, and limited institutional support, which collectively undermine their ability to engage meaningfully with youth. This suggests that, although youth work is increasingly present within formal education, its integration remains structurally weak and uneven. In contrast, studies conducted in the Global North tend to present a more clearly defined and complementary relationship between youth workers and teachers, where roles are distinct and mutually reinforcing (Pantazidis & Pechtelidis, 2025; Kivijärvi et al., 2025). However, the present study diverges from this perspective by demonstrating that, within the South African context, the absence of clear role description contributes to a pattern of role ambiguity and workload overload. Our study further reports that youth workers are being required to perform a range of additional duties, including administrative and lesson preparation, which fall outside their professional scope. This not only dilutes the specialised contribution of youth workers but also limits the time available for direct engagement with young people. Such role diffusion reflects a broader lack of institutional clarity regarding the purpose and value of youth work within schools. Furthermore, the findings indicate that youth work in South African schools has not yet been fully institutionalised as a distinct and recognised profession. Youth workers described how their roles are often misunderstood or undervalued by teachers, which negatively affects both their

practice and professional identity. This lack of recognition reinforces hierarchical dynamics within schools, where educational roles are prioritised over developmental support for young people. Similar challenges have been reported in a previous study in South Africa, particularly in the context of school-based health and sexual education programmes, where youth workers experienced significant barriers due to limited recognition and support from teaching staff (Chauke, 2024). The present study extends this body of work by showing that such marginalisation is not limited to specific programme areas but reflects a broader systemic issue affecting youth work more generally. A particularly concerning finding is that youth workers are frequently perceived as volunteers rather than trained professionals. This perception contributes to the devaluation of youth work and influences how time and resources are allocated within schools. As a result, youth work activities are often not prioritised within the formal timetable, with schools placing greater emphasis on academic outcomes at the expense of holistic youth development. This reinforces a narrow understanding of education, where learners' social, emotional, and personal needs are secondary to academic performance.

In addition, our findings highlight the role of funding constraints in shaping the delivery of youth work in South African schools. The study shows that the absence of dedicated budgets for youth work activities restricts their ability to design and implement impactful programmes. This lack of financial support further entrenches the marginal position of youth work within schools and limits opportunities for innovation and responsiveness to learners' needs. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Pope, 2016; Petkovic, 2022), which demonstrate that the underfunding of youth work has significant implications for programme quality and reach. However, the present study adds to this literature by illustrating how funding limitations intersect with role ambiguity and institutional marginalisation to create a complex set of barriers that constrain youth work practice. Importantly, these operational challenges have implications not only for programme implementation but also for the well-being and professional functioning of youth workers. This account suggests that persistent role confusion, lack of recognition, and increased workload may negatively affect their motivation and mental health. In this regard, empowerment theory provides a useful lens for interpretation. From a psychological empowerment perspective, effective practice requires that individuals experience a sense of competence, autonomy, and meaning in their roles. However, the conditions described in this study, characterised by limited control, unclear expectations, and low recognition, are likely to undermine these key components of empowerment (Zimmerman, 2005).

While the findings of this study mirror international research regarding the pivotal role of youth workers in formal education, significant contextual divergences emerge. Our study acknowledges that in South Africa, schools serve as stable architectures within the community, making them the default sites for youth work, even though the teaching architecture and youth work architecture are not yet aligned. Consequently, youth work in South Africa is often integrated into formal education through employment initiatives, whereas in the Global North, it is typically integrated through regulated professional frameworks that allow for fuller implementation of youth work activities. Furthermore, our findings highlight a distinct identity friction not commonly seen in Global North literature. In South Africa, youth workers are frequently designated as teacher assistants, a title that may be perceived as deprofessionalising or as a minor version of a proper profession. This misidentification poses a significant barrier to the formal professionalisation of the field in South Africa. Finally, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how youth work in South Africa embodies the spirit of Ubuntu. By bridging the gap between the school environment and the socio-economic realities of township and village life, youth

workers provide a form of holistic support that is characteristic of the Southern African tradition of community education.

4.3. Limitations and Strengths

While this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of youth workers in South African schools, particularly their roles in supporting youth's personal and academic development, as well as the challenges they face it has several limitations. First, the study is limited by its methodology, specifically the small sample size ($n = 22$) drawn from only two provinces. As a result, the findings cannot be generalised to all youth workers across South Africa. Future research should include youth workers from all provinces to enhance the validity and generalisability of the findings. Second, some participants were employed on fixed-term contracts and were not professionally trained youth workers. This may have affected their understanding of youth work principles and their roles within the school context. Future studies should focus on professionally trained youth workers to gain deeper insights into professional practice within formal education. The third limitation of this study is that some of the interview questions exhibited a positive bias. Because the questions inherently carried an element of appreciative inquiry by focusing on the strengths and justifications of the youth workers' roles, participants naturally emphasised the positive impacts of their services on young people in South African schools. To mitigate this limitation and strengthen trustworthiness, future research should incorporate quantitative methodologies to measure the tangible outcomes of youth work interventions. Additionally, triangulating these findings with the perspectives of school principals, teachers, and most importantly the young people themselves would provide a more objective, multi-faceted evaluation of the impact of youth work in schools. Despite these limitations, a key strength of this study lies in its in-depth qualitative approach, which provides rich, detailed accounts of youth workers' lived experiences through direct engagement with participants. Thirdly, our study relies on self-reported positive effects of youth work. To further analyse the role of youth work in schools, the perspectives of young people and other professionals working in schools would be needed.

4.4. Implication for Policy and Practice

Prioritising the integration of youth work practice within formal education in South Africa has important implications for both policy and practice. At the policy level, there is a need to formally recognise and institutionalise the role of youth workers in schools through frameworks that promote positive youth development, positive reinforcement of behaviour, restorative disciplinary approaches, and relationship-building strategies. In practice, schools should adopt collaborative approaches that bring together youth workers, educators, and school management teams to implement these supportive and preventative interventions. Such integration has the potential to promote more equitable and inclusive disciplinary practices, reduce reliance on punitive measures, and create supportive school environments that enhance both the academic achievement and personal development of learners in South African schools.

4.5. Implication for Theory

Consistent with empowerment theory, our findings demonstrate that youth workers in South African schools facilitate empowerment by providing psychosocial support, which enables young people to develop resilience and exercise agency over their lives. As the theory posits, individual psychological well-being is enhanced through the empowerment process, a link evidenced in this study by the measurable improvement in youth mental health within the school environment. However, traditional applications of empowerment theory often prioritise the individual level of analysis, frequently overlooking the critical

dimension of organisational empowerment. Our findings extend the empowerment theory by identifying the school as an empowered organisation that requires its own internal alignment. Specifically, we argue that for individual empowerment to be sustainable, the organisation (the school) must be empowered through role clarity and systemic integration of youth work. When teachers and staff fully understand and validate the role of youth workers, the organisation moves from a fragmented state to an integrated one, providing the necessary structural scaffolding for youth empowerment to flourish.

5. Conclusions

While youth work in South Africa aligns with global goals of empowerment, its implementation is uniquely situated within the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative. This initiative prioritises employability and teacher assistant roles, often overshadowing the distinct relational traits of professional youth work. To address this, South African National Youth Policy must move beyond viewing these practitioners as temporary paraprofessionals. Instead, it should embrace their role as agents of community education, integrating their practice into the formal architecture of the school system to ensure sustainable, holistic support. While formalising youth work within the school architecture risks schoolifying the practice, potentially subjecting autonomous, relation-based youth work to rigid school bureaucracies this integration is a pragmatic necessity. In the South African context, where youth work lacks formal professional recognition and dedicated state budgets, complete independence often equates to structural precarity and marginalisation. Therefore, integrating youth work into formal school systems offers a vital pathway to professional legitimacy, stable employment, and sustainable funding, making the risk of institutional assimilation a necessary trade-off for long-term survival and community impact. In addition, while the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI) provides a crucial top-down framework for integrating youth workers into South African schools, there is an urgent need for grassroots, bottom-up strategies to sustain this integration. True sustainability requires fostering mutual recognition and collaborative partnerships on the ground where teachers and youth workers actively negotiate their roles through small-scale, mutually managed projects spanning primary and secondary levels. Specifically, schools should establish co-led steering committees comprising both teachers and youth workers. Furthermore, youth workers must be intentionally integrated into daily school environments, including shared spaces like staff rooms. This grassroots visibility allows youth workers to organically build trust, demystify their roles, and directly demonstrate the unique value of youth work to the broader school community.

This study positions youth workers in South African schools as critical social agents who operate across education, social, and emotional domains, extending existing scholarship by foregrounding their role in youth mental health promotion and context-responsive interventions. However, their contribution to positive youth development remains constrained by limited institutional recognition, inadequate resourcing, and systemic policy gaps. The findings highlight the need for stronger policy alignment and formal recognition of youth work within the basic education sector. This includes rethinking existing programs such as the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) to prioritise the placement of qualified youth workers in schools, not merely as support staff, but as professionals capable of designing and implementing development-oriented programs that complement formal education. Such reform would contribute to the professionalisation of youth work in South Africa. Furthermore, the study advocates for a more holistic approach to youth development within the education system, one that integrates academic, social, psychological, and emotional dimensions. Addressing these interconnected needs is essential for enhancing young people's overall well-being and improving educational outcomes.

At the start of each term, the principal should offer the youth worker 10 min during the formal staff meeting to present their upcoming initiatives (e.g., anti-smoking campaigns with police, resilience workshops). This frames them as professional collaborators rather than extra administrative hands. The Department of Basic Education (DBE), in collaboration with the South African Youth Development Association, must issue a standardised School-Based Youth Worker Job Description framework. This formalises their status as specialised professionals within the broader psychosocial support team of the school.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

BEEI	Basic Education Employment Initiative
NYDA	National Youth Development Agency
PYEI	Presidential Youth Employment Initiative

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