

Assessing Students` Experiences of Psychosocial Support for Sustainable Learning at a South African TVET College



Michael Mbongiseni Buthelezi ¹  & Dipane Joseph Hlalele ² 

¹ School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, University of Limpopo, South Africa.

² School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

A positive psychosocial environment is necessary to create a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning. Thus, this study assessed students` experiences of psychosocial support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) College. This study followed a qualitative phenomenological research technique, which provides participants with a voice to share their psychosocial experiences. Data was collected from twenty individuals through face-to-face interviews and a focus group discussion. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The results of the study revealed that majority of students at this college experience low self-esteem, stressful situations, lack of peer tutoring, peer counselling, counselling skills from a Student Development Practitioner (SDP), and inadequate provision of social and emotional needs. This was attributed to a lack of psychosocial support to students from lecturers and SDPs, who ought to work collaboratively to provide such support to students at South African TVET colleges. It became evident from this study that lecturers and college personnel need to assist students in improving their self-esteem by doing the following: reducing students` stressful situations, promoting peer tutoring, providing peer counselling, providing counselling skills and catering for students` social and emotional needs at a college in order to promote sustainable learning. This study will empower lecturers and SDPs with psychosocial support skills to be able to respond to the psychosocial challenges of student development.

Correspondence

Michael Mbongiseni Buthelezi

Email:

michael.buthelezi@ul.ac.za

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INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, there are fifty public TVET colleges assigned by the government to assist in addressing the shortage of skills. For this initiative of the government to be realised, the academic environment needs to cater for the needs of diversified students at a public TVET college. There is therefore the need for Psychosocial support to be provided to all students irrespective of their backgrounds.¹ Psychosocial support (PSS) refers to the processes and actions that promote the complete well-being of people in their social world. It includes support provided by family, lecturers, and other peers. Research shows a

¹ Lynne Jones and Peter Ventevogel, "From Exception to the Norm: How Mental Health Interventions Have Become Part and Parcel of the Humanitarian Response," *World Psychiatry* 20, no. 1 (2021): 2.

connection between psychosocial support services and student retention. The majority of the students who register at this TVET college in South Africa come from low economic backgrounds.² This is highlighted by Dr. Nzimande, the current Higher Education and Training Minister who mentioned that the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has supported public TVET College students who display academic ability but come from low socio-economic backgrounds.³ The majority of these TVET college students are funded by the government through NSFAS and have restricted access to counselling services because of their socio-economic status. Psychosocial support services are crucial since they assist students to be settled in a new setting through receiving counselling services and psychosocial support services.⁴

There is a framework for student support services at most South African TVET colleges. However, majority of the South African TVET colleges do not implement it. There are also policies that have been developed for South African TVET colleges to assist students in coping with their psychosocial challenges. These policies are also not being well implemented or coordinated within the South African TVET sector. One of the challenges that has been identified at TVET colleges in South Africa affecting the implementation of student support services is the lack of resources. There are limited resources needed to provide psychosocial support for students. Notably, there are very few South African TVET colleges that offer psychosocial support services, and there is no strategy in place for supervising and reporting on these services. The White Paper for Post School Education and Training advocates for a new framework for public TVET colleges that includes psychosocial support services that offer student counselling and support services to help college students succeed academically and socially as well as morally.⁵

An enabling environment for South African TVET college students is essential for sustainable and successful learning and for ensuring a positive impact on the retention rates of South African TVET college students. Needed interventions to create an enabling environment include, among others, mentoring, psychosocial support, and academic programmes. South African TVET college students' struggle to establish identity is the main challenge they experience, which creates the necessity for psychosocial support for sustainable learning. This struggle affects their ability to perform well socially, culturally, emotionally, and academically.⁶ A number of policies have been created from time to time to enhance higher education quality, but people who are making these policies usually miss the key element of higher education which is the students.⁷ Providing psychosocial support to students, including social and emotional support along with academic support, creates awareness in students and can help to enhance the quality of higher education.⁸ Building social and emotional learning skills can also assist students in responding to difficult and unexpected situations in a calm and emotionally regulated manner, enabling them to set out and develop strategies for dealing with difficult circumstances, and to interact and work with others to address problems.⁹ Psychosocial support is important for students' education and development and has been shown to further influence an individual's achievement and outcomes. Furthermore, it has been stated that psychosocial support services improve student retention and academic performance.¹⁰ Therefore, student psychosocial and academic support services are valuable strategies for improving the performance of college students; and removing barriers that hamper the utilisation of psychosocial support services by college students, which include anxiety and belief that their issues cannot be resolved. These valuable strategies include developing competencies such as resilience, self-awareness,

² W. A. Tol et al., "Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings: A Public Mental Health Perspective," *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 24, no. 6 (December 24, 2015): 484–94, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796015000827>.

³ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), "TVET Colleges South Africa," 2018, <http://fetcolleges.co.za>.

⁴ K. E. Miller et al., "A Call for Greater Conceptual Clarity in the Field of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings," *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 30 (January 8, 2021): e5, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796020001110>.

⁵ Department of Higher Education and Training, "White Paper for Post School Education and Training. Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System" (Pretoria: South Africa, 2014).

⁶ Education Links, *Social and Emotional Learning in Crisis and Conflict Settings*, 2018, <https://www.edu-links.org/learning/social-and-emotional-learning-crisis-and-conflict-settings>.

⁷ Sukhdeep Kaur, "Student Support Services in Higher Education: A Student Perspective," *International Journal of Indian Psychology* 3, no. 3 (2016): 126–32.

⁸ Louise Yorke et al., "The Importance of Students' Socio-Emotional Learning, Mental Health, and Wellbeing in the Time of COVID-19" (Oxford, UK, March 15, 2021), https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2021/025.

⁹ Miller et al., "A Call for Greater Conceptual Clarity in the Field of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings."

¹⁰ Anthrologica and MHPSS Collaborative, "Review and Assessment of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Intervention Research in Humanitarian Settings" (Cardiff, UK: Elrha, 2021), <https://www.elrha.org/researchdatabase/review-and-assessment-of-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-intervention-research-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

collaboration, empathy, respect, and psychosocial support that can contribute to students' pathways beyond their education.¹¹ Psychosocial support is important for students' education and development and has been shown to further influence an individual's achievement and outcomes. This includes the level of education that students achieve, their academic progress while they are in school, their pathways beyond education including entry into the labour market, and future earnings.¹²

There are, however, limited educational and psychosocial support services to assist students at TVET colleges to be successful in developing and creating new learning approaches and also to prosper during and after their studies.¹³ These colleges should offer students relevant information, adequate facilities, and a favourable setting that allows students to adjust to their new circumstances. Psychosocial Support Services (PSS) are a cluster of facilities and activities that are afforded to college students in order to make the learning process easier and more interesting.¹⁴ PSS serves as the interface between colleges and students and higher education quality depends directly on the support services provided by colleges. It can thus be argued that, if South African TVET colleges do not provide adequate psychosocial support services to their students, then they compromise the quality of education. Consequently, it is important to understand more about the experiences of South African TVET college students regarding psychosocial support for sustainable learning in order to maximise the performance of South African college students. This paper, therefore, assesses students' experiences of psychosocial support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college. The question underlying this study is: What are the students' experiences of psychosocial support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The TVET College landscape in South Africa

TVET stands for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and offers training of a vocational or occupational nature meaning that it prepares students for a specific job, several employment possibilities, or for self-employment. TVET colleges in South Africa serve young people who want to enrol for vocational programmes after grade 9 or after finishing school with a grade 12, as well as students who want to complete their schooling. In South Africa, there are fifty registered and recognised public TVET colleges with 264 campuses spread across South Africa.¹⁵ These TVET colleges fall under the Department of Higher Education and Training.

Sustainable Learning

Sustainable learning includes a formalised knowledge transfer from the lecturers to the students.¹⁶ Sustainable learning rests on collaboration between lecturers, students, parents and stakeholders.¹⁷ It includes caring, respecting, and inspiring people.¹⁸ Therefore, a learning environment that is sustainable is a setting that can improve TVET college students' academic achievement. Sustainability ensures that human development efforts attain lasting improvement in the lives of students including communities, without causing harm or compromising their wellbeing or that of others in the present and future.¹⁹ Through sustainable learning, South African TVET college students can attain a higher level of understanding.²⁰

¹¹ Yorke et al., "The Importance of Students' Socio-Emotional Learning, Mental Health, and Wellbeing in the Time of COVID-19."

¹² International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), "Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery" (New York, USA: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2010).

¹³ J.R. Hayes, "Commentary on the Book: Through the Models of Writing," in *Studies in Writing: Through the Models of Writing*, ed. G. Rijlaarsdam, D. Alamar, and L. Chanquoy, vol. 9 (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2015), 1–29.

¹⁴ Kaur, "Student Support Services in Higher Education: A Student Perspective."

¹⁵ Department of Higher Education and Training, "White Paper for Post School Education and Training. Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System."

¹⁶ C.T. Tsotetsi, "The Implementation of Professional Teacher Development Policies: A Continuing Education Perspective" (University of the Free State, 2013).

¹⁷ Mamello Mapesela, Dipane Hlalele, and Gregory Alexander, "Overcoming Adversity: A Holistic Response to Creating Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies," *Journal of Human Ecology* 38, no. 2 (2012): 91–103.

¹⁸ Mahlomaholo, M.G, and Ntshandama, V.O. "Grade 12 examination results to 20 position: The need for the creation of sustainable learning environments for social justice in all school." *Journal for new generation sciences* 10, no.2 (2012):44-62.

¹⁹ Miller et al., "A Call for Greater Conceptual Clarity in the Field of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings."

²⁰ Ministry of Education, *How Does Learning Happen? A Resource about Learning through Relationships for Those Who Work with Young Children and Their Families* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2014).

Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support is about easing the psychological, social and physical difficulties of individuals, families, and communities.²¹ It is about enhancing wellbeing and helping people to recover and adapt after their lives have been disrupted. It aims to achieve the following core responsibilities:

- To support and promote the capacity of human beings
- To improve ecology socially
- And to understand the cultural influences

Psychosocial support is about meeting the students' needs developmentally and providing assistance to prevent problems that can affect their learning abilities. This support refers to efforts that can help in dealing with challenges by ensuring that students' needs are met socially, emotionally, and academically. It includes policies as well as any programme, framework, or guidelines that aim to develop the psychosocial well-being of people.²² PSS refers to a relationship between the student, family, community and society that relates to how the child feels about self and life.²³ Psychosocial support is recognising the significance of the social context in addressing stressful psychological events and reconstructing social structures to give effective support.²⁴ Psychosocial support is a comprehensive service that answers the students' needs. In general, psychosocial support refers to processes that support the individuals' well-being holistically in their environment.²⁵ Psychosocial support is the support that family members and peers provide to individuals.²⁶ Psychosocial support helps peers, family members, individuals, and community members to be resilient.²⁷ The aim of psychosocial support is to help individuals improve their lives after going through crises and difficulties. As mentioned previously, this study assesses the students' experiences of psychosocial support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college.

Current Situation Regarding Psychosocial Support for Sustainable Learning at a South African TVET College

Academic Support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college

The support and the provision of academic support services for students are essential functions at any HEI as the students form the very heart of the HEI business.²⁸ These authors have noted that the relevance of academic support services or student support services is evident in UNESCO's document on the Manual for Developing, Implementing and Assessing Student Affairs Programmed and Services. Most South African TVET colleges are founded on the principle of providing academic support services or student support services which generally helps foster the development of students' competencies, life skills and habits of academic excellence. Academic support services assist students to acquire excellence through transition, excellence through self-knowledge, and excellence through the appropriate use of resources, among other support services.²⁹ Mass access to higher education demands that South African TVET colleges provide psychosocial support to enhance and develop performance, increase throughput and retention, and reduce attrition rate. Support programmes for students cover helping students from poor backgrounds to manage mainstream courses; providing a safe space to address their challenges in learning; developing skills to study and write; and clarifying the content's main concepts and elements. Students' programmes of support assist them in facing challenges and encourage them to learn effectively. This

²¹ Ministry of Health, *Framework for Psychosocial Support in Emergencies* (Wellington: Ministry of Health, 2016).

²² Jones and Ventevogel, "From Exception to the Norm: How Mental Health Interventions Have Become Part and Parcel of the Humanitarian Response."

²³ J. Morgan, "Psychosocial Wellbeing Series,," Johannesburg: RPSSI, 2009.

²⁴ UNESCO, *Student Affairs and Services in Higher Education: Global Foundation, Issues and Best Practices* (Paris: UNESCO, 2009).

²⁵ C. Gladwell and L. Tanner, "Hear It from the Children: Why Education in Emergencies Is Critical," *Report Prepared for Save the Children and Norwegian*, 2014.

²⁶ S. Nicolai, "Psychosocial Needs of Conflict-Affected Children and Adolescents," *World Bank-IIEP Summer School, 7-15 July 2003. Background Paper* (Paris: IIEP-UNESCO, 2003).

²⁷ IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, "Psychosocial Interventions—A Handbook," 2010.

²⁸ Samukelisiwe Mngomezulu and Labby Ramrathan, "Academic Intervention Experiences of 'at-Risk' Students in a South African University," *Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa* 17(2015):116–41.

²⁹ Cecilia Junio-Sabio, "Importance of Academic Support Services: An Assessment by the Students in Oman," *International Journal of Information Technology and Business Management* 3, no. 1 (2012): 14–23.

implies that student support programmes contribute towards epistemological access and help to lessen encountered academic challenges.

Support of South African TVET college students emotionally, socially and academically can assist them to gain knowledge and to develop their life skills. Findings show that the participation of students in college activities motivates them to perform well academically.³⁰ College students who are highly developed and involved in college activities do not drop out.³¹ TVET college students who are involved in other activities other than class activities gain knowledge, develop relevant skills, and stay at college.

Emotional Support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college

Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive emotions accurately, to access and generate emotions and to understand emotions and emotional knowledge.³² Research has shown that emotional intelligence plays a very important role in higher education.³³ In addition, they argue that the emotional intelligence of students at public TVET colleges affects their motivation to learn, and their perception of information and academic achievements. An emotional intelligence model is regarded as valuable because it provides a clear and accessible framework for understanding and measuring the ability to work with emotions. Some authors have argued that it is essential to develop emotional intelligence at any age.³⁴ This development can be achieved in different ways, both by students alone, and with assistance. Consequently, lecturers and student development practitioners at a TVET college can assist students in developing their emotional intelligence in order to improve their educational performance.

Emotional intelligence has such a significant influence on student academic achievement that it should inspire lecturers at South African TVET colleges to look for strategies to increase the emotional intelligence of students, thereby encouraging them to be more successful students.³⁵ Emotionally intelligent lecturers are more likely to identify their own personal emotional flaws and to use a reflective approach in negatively charged situations involving students and peers.³⁶ Therefore, it is important to train lecturers in the concepts of emotional intelligence could influence students' emotional growth, relationship skills and responsible decision-making, their academic achievement and success. Supporting and developing emotional intelligence at a South African TVET college involves abilities that can be categorised as self-awareness, empathy, managing emotions, self-motivation, and handling relationships with others. It can thus be said that the emotional and mental well-being of students are some of the critical areas that need to be attended to for sustainable learning and success of students in South African TVET colleges.

Psychosocial Support for sustainable learning at a public TVET college

Public TVET college students should work toward developing their professionalism and personality by developing their identities, following career interests, and developing relationships.³⁷ The high levels of stress may disturb the efforts of students to meet their goals. This is consistent with the observation of Camara et.al., that when they reported that the academic responsibilities of students contribute to this stress.³⁸ Students at South African TVET colleges do four subjects in Report 191 programmes per semester and seven subjects in NC (V) programmes per year, spending most of their time trying to meet

³⁰ Kirkham, R, and Ringelstein, D. "Student peer assisted mentoring (SPAM): A conceptual framework." E-Journal of Business Education and Scholarship of Teaching 2, no.2 (2008): 39–49.

³¹ Mallette, B.L, and Cabrera, A.F. "Determinants of withdrawal behaviour: An exploratory study." *Research in Higher Education* 32, no.2 (2017): 179-194.

³² O Kotomina and A. Sazhina, "Exploring Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education: Management Programme Students in Russia," *Perm, National Research University Higher School of Economics*, 2018, 1–17.

³³ Kotomina and Sazhina, "Exploring Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education: Management Programme Students in Russia."

³⁴ Niva Dolev and Shosh Leshem, "Developing Emotional Intelligence Competence among Teachers," *Teacher Development* 21, no. 1 (2017): 21–39.

³⁵ Kotomina and Sazhina, "Exploring Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education: Management Programme Students in Russia."

³⁶ Somayeh Daghighayesh and Reza Zabihi, "The Nexus Between Reflective Teaching And Teachers' emotional Intelligence," *Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods* 6, no. 9 (2016): 257.

³⁷ T.A. Salamao, "Regional Conceptual Framework for Psychosocial Support for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children and Youth," 2011, sadc.int.

³⁸ Maria Camara, Gonzalo Bacigalupe, and Patricia Padilla, "The Role of Social Support in Adolescents: Are You Helping Me or Stressing Me Out?," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 22, no. 2 (2017): 123–36.

academic challenges.³⁹ In addition, public TVET college students who do not qualify for NSFAS are financially stressed trying to pay back study loans. Many of these South African TVET college students are doing part-time jobs and also try to balance them with their studies for academic success.⁴⁰ Some changes in lives that take place during college such as change from high school to college can result in loneliness and homesickness that can contribute to the stress experienced by students.⁴¹ It is therefore imperative for South African TVET college students to take full responsibility for their independence and to learn to balance their time between recreation, college, and work.⁴²

Stress experienced by TVET college students could also be associated with challenges that students had faced prior to their academic life. For instance, it is argued that South African TVET College students who encounter abuse and problems at home experience problems before registration.⁴³ Consequently, they can suffer from mental disorders and emotional instability.⁴⁴ Most of these South African TVET college students take alcohol and drugs in order to deal with issues that are stress-related.⁴⁵ Substance abuse has the following consequences; getting injured and being sexually assaulted.⁴⁶ Substance abuse, and mental health problems negatively affect the academic performance of students, leading to a high attrition rate which affects employment opportunities.⁴⁷

The Role of Student Development Practitioners for Sustainable Learning at a South African TVET college

SDPs` roles at a South African TVET college are important for students` development. However, there are no positive relationships between college students and SDPs at South African TVET colleges.⁴⁸ The importance of this relationship to sustainable learning and academic achievement of college students is crucial. SDPs at South African TVET colleges provide the following to college students to improve their academic success: advice, mentorships, resources, and counselling. Consistent findings from cross-sectional studies on the roles of SDPs revealed the important role of student development practitioners in students` well-being. A study of 115 university students found that students who had higher support had lower rates of stress and were well-adjusted to university.⁴⁹ This finding is consistent with previous studies and highlights the important role of student development practitioners in providing support to protect the mental health of students and for sustainable learning. In this study, the researchers found that social support from SDPs has a substantial impact on the emotional, social and academic performance of South African TVET college students.⁵⁰

The relationship between college students and their SDPs as advisors should continue even outside the college. There should be professional relationships between students and SDPs who have knowledge about their personal lives such as work, hobbies, and extracurricular activities. SDPs should know of the

³⁹ Kumaraswamy, N. "Academic stress, anxiety, and depression among college students: A brief review." *International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities* 5, (2013): 135-145.

⁴⁰ L.W. Perna, "Studying College Choice: A Proposed Conceptual Model," in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, ed. J. C. Smart, vol. 20 (.Dor-drecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 2006).

⁴¹ Lauri Dusselier et al., "Personal, Health, Academic, and Environmental Predictors of Stress for Residence Hall Students," *Journal of American College Health* 54, no. 1 (2005): 15-24.

⁴² C. Joynes, *The Role of Education in Contributing to Safety and Well-Being in Conflict Settings. DFID Helpdesk Report* (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2016).

⁴³ Ronald C Kessler et al., "Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 62, no. 6 (2005): 593-602.

⁴⁴ Henry Ongori and Joseph Evans Agolla, "Occupational Stress in Organizations and Its Effects on Organizational Performance," *Journal of Management Research* 8, no. 3 (2008): 123-35.

⁴⁵ Amelia M Arria et al., "Discontinuous College Enrollment: Associations with Substance Use and Mental Health," *Psychiatric Services* 64, no. 2 (2013): 165-72.

⁴⁶ Sean Esteban McCabe, Brady T. West, and Henry Wechsler, "Trends and College-level Characteristics Associated with the Non-medical Use of Prescription Drugs among US College Students from 1993 to 2001," *Addiction* 102, no. 3 (March 8, 2007): 455-65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1360-0443.2006.01733.x>.

⁴⁷ L.A.Douce and R.P. Keeling, *A Strategic Primer on College Student Mental Health* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2014).

⁴⁸ Robbins, S. B, Lauver, K, Le, H, Davis, D, Langley, R, and Carlstrom, A. "Do psychosocial and study factors predict college outcomes? A meta-analysis." *Psychological Bulletin* 130, no.4 (2004): 261-288.

⁴⁹ Nuworza Kugbey, Samuel Osei-Boadi, and Ethel Akpene Atefoe, "The Influence of Social Support on the Levels of Depression, Anxiety and Stress among Students in Ghana.," *Journal of Education and Practice* 6, no. 25 (2015): 135-40.

⁵⁰ Mohd Mahzan Awang, Faridah Mydin Kutty, and Abdul Razaq Ahmad, "Perceived Social Support and Well Being: First-Year Student Experience in University," *International Education Studies* 7, no. 13 (December 22, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v7n13p261>.

well-being of students or otherwise, and how they learn. Some researchers believe that it is the responsibility of college students to initiate good relationships with their SDPs and to divulge their personal information, while other researchers believe that it is the responsibility of SDPs to initiate good relationships with students. The way to resolve this is for it to be agreed upon that it is the responsibility of both parties to initiate relationships.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted Arthur Chickering and Reisser's theory which focuses primarily on identity development. It examines this by means of seven vectors of development that contribute to the development of identity such as developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Chickering's theory states that these vectors can be thought of as a series of stages or tasks that deal with feeling, thinking, believing, and relating to others. Individuals may progress through the vectors at different rates. A rigid application of Chickering and Reisser's vectors of identity development implies that participants in this study were likely to experience psychosocial problems because they were not supported psychosocially by their lecturers and SDP for identity development. The lack of adequate psychosocial support had prevented South African TVET college students from developing their competence, managing their emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing their identity, developing purpose and developing integrity.⁵¹ Therefore from an educational perspective, lecturers and SDP at a South African TVET college need to support these students for sustainable learning.

METHODOLOGY

For South African TVET college students to share their experiences on psychosocial support for sustainable learning, qualitative phenomenological research was used in this study. Phenomenological research is an inductive qualitative research approach that is rooted in the philosophical proposition that researchers can gain valuable insight into the structure of how people understand their experiences.⁵² Data was collected from twenty individuals through face-to-face interviews and a focus group discussion. The individual interviews were semi-structured to yield detailed personal narratives.⁵³ Each participant was encouraged to produce a collage of their lived experiences and what they would have liked those experiences to have been. The participants were then encouraged to comment on their collages. Using a variety of methods to elicit information allowed individuals to express their impressions of their own life stories in different ways.⁵⁴

Finally, a focus group discussion between the participants was held to gain an understanding of their different experiences and expectations. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from this study. Thematic analysis of qualitative data is considered an effective way to draw valid conclusions in studies on human-environmental interactions.⁵⁵ In this study, all data collected were recorded and transcribed. The material was then analysed with the use of the steps proposed by Creswell.⁵⁶ In the identification of common themes and subthemes related to the experiences of the participants on psychosocial support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college. The researchers organised and prepared the data, read through all of it, began a detailed analysis with a coding process, used the coding process to generate a description of themes, described themes in terms of qualitative narrative, and interpreted and made meaning of data. The thematic analysis allowed the researchers to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences of students on psychosocial support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college. Ethical issues were considered when this study was conducted

⁵¹ Saul McLeod, "Piaget's Theory and Stages of Cognitive Development," *Developmental Psychology, Simply Psychology*, 2018.

⁵² Linda A Bliss, "Phenomenological Research: Inquiry to Understand the Meanings of People's Experiences," *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology (IJAVET)* 7, no. 3 (2016): 14–26.

⁵³ Barbara DiCicco-Bloom and Benjamin F Crabtree, "The Qualitative Research Interview," *Medical Education* 40, no. 4 (April 2006): 314–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x>.

⁵⁴ V. Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

⁵⁵ Lindsay C. Stringer et al., "Adaptations to Climate Change, Drought and Desertification: Local Insights to Enhance Policy in Southern Africa," *Environmental Science & Policy* 12, no. 7 (November 2009): 748–65, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2009.04.002>.

⁵⁶ John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage publications, 2017).

and the collected data were not detrimental to participants. An Ethics Clearance Certificate was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa to make sure that issues of ethics were met. Permission to conduct this study before data was collected and was also sought from the Principal of the South African TVET college where the study was undertaken. All participants received letters of concern to sign which clarified the research purpose.

The importance of respecting individuals, especially when the investigation concerns personal social issues.⁵⁷ Participants in this study were selected purposively on the basis of the following characteristics: they were all accessible as they studied at a South African TVET college; they agreed to participate; and they were older than 18 years old. The study sample comprised 20 participants, twelve female students and eight male students. All the participants came from a background of poverty and were from single-parent families. A profile of the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

| Code name | Age | Gender | Programme | Level |
|-------------|-----|--------|------------|-------|
| Nelly | 23 | Female | NC(V) | 4 |
| Fikile | 21 | Female | Report 191 | 5 |
| Nomvula | 20 | Female | NC(V) | 2 |
| Nathi | 25 | Male | Report 191 | 4 |
| Lucky | 26 | Male | NC(V) | 3 |
| Nonkululeko | 22 | Female | NC(V) | 4 |
| Precious | 19 | Female | Report 191 | 5 |
| Nozipho | 25 | Female | NC(V) | 2 |
| Ntethe | 19 | Female | NC(V) | 4 |
| Patience | 20 | Female | Report 191 | 6 |
| Mavis | 22 | Female | Report 191 | 4 |
| Cindy | 19 | Female | NC(V) | 2 |
| Scholastic | 24 | Female | Report 191 | 6 |
| Mafu | 22 | Male | Report 191 | 4 |
| Joseph | 27 | Male | NC(V) | 2 |
| Mzwandile | 23 | Male | NC(V) | 4 |
| Nonhlanhla | 25 | Female | Report 191 | 5 |
| Thuli | 21 | Male | NC(V) | 2 |
| Mzwandile | 20 | Male | NC(V) | 3 |
| Hlubi | 24 | Male | NC(V) | 4 |

NCV* (National Certificate Vocational)

Pseudonyms or code names were used for each participant to protect their identities. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data generated, the researchers created a tolerant environment in the focus group. This encouraged participants to share their perceptions, points of view, experiences, wishes and concerns, without pressurising them.⁵⁸ To ensure transferability, a sample was purposefully selected from the group of twenty students.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The participants' experiences of psychosocial support for sustainable learning were documented in the findings and presented verbatim. Their experiences were categorised and the following themes: lack of academic support, lack of emotional support, lack of psychosocial support, and misunderstanding of the

⁵⁷ P. D. Leedy and J. E. Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2010).

⁵⁸ Dipane Hlalele and Cias T Tsotetsi, "Promoting Student Teachers' Adaptive Capabilities through Community Engagement," *Perspectives in Education* 34, no. 3 (2016): 29–42.

roles of student development practitioners at a South African TVET college. These themes are discussed below.

Lack of Academic Support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college

Participants raised an issue of not being fully supported academically, which led them to drop out. Two of the participants, Nelly and Fikile, described their experiences by saying:

“[Eish...] such thing disturbs us psychologically, and even socially. That is why we tend to drop out before we even write our final examination. In our college, we used to have peer tutoring which was really assisting students to improve academically. I do not know what really happened to it.”

“I am very happy that the students are deliberating on these challenges and support without any fear. To add to what Nelly has just said, I think lecturers need to be trained when it comes to dealing with the social and emotional needs of students. I also think that peer counselling and peer tutoring can have a positive impact on developing students emotionally, socially, and academically. Thank you.”

From the discussions with the students, it was evident that these students were still experiencing challenges with regard to academic support. Hence, they proposed that peer tutoring and peer counselling should be reinstated to deal with academic, emotional, and social issues.

Lack of Emotional Support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college

Another issue brought by one of the participants was a lack of emotional support programmes, when asked about the psychosocial support provided to them. It then became clear according to the students that most of the lecturers lacked knowledge and skills when it came to dealing with the social and emotional needs of students. Participants proposed that lecturers need to be trained on how to deal with the social and emotional needs of students. The body of research should inspect the impact lecturers can have on the skills of students socially and emotionally.⁵⁹ When the participants described their experiences with the lack of emotional support, one of the participants, Nomvula, described hers, saying:

“I think our lecturers lack counselling skills. The Student Development Practitioner should really conduct pieces of training for these lecturers so that they can be able to assist us with emotional support”.

This statement of the participant showed that lecturers experienced challenges in handling students' emotional and social needs. Based on the experience identified, lecturers need to be trained in counselling skills for these participants to succeed academically.

Lack of psychosocial support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college

The research participants were cognisant of the way in which the lack of psychosocial support had contributed to their low self-esteem and stressful situations. These features were the current barriers and challenges experienced by students and they were adversely affecting them morally, emotionally, socially and academically. These barriers stemmed from individual interviews and focus group discussions with students, and they were adversely affecting their sustainable learning at a South African TVET college.

When the participants described their notions of low self-esteem and stressful situations, three of the participants, Nathi, Lucky and Nonkululeko, put theirs this way:

“I also wish to find out if we can be assisted when it comes to building self-esteem. It looks like most of us; especially students tend to compare ourselves with other students instead of focusing on ourselves.”

“I remember when I came to the college for my first registration. All lecturers were telling us about 80% attendance. This means that as a student, you must obtain 80% attendance in order to write an examination. How am I expected to obtain 80% attendance if NSFAS (National Student

⁵⁹ Elizabeth J Glennie et al., “Student Social and Emotional Development and Accountability: Perspective of Teachers.,” *National Network of State Teachers of the Year*, 2017.

Financial Aid Scheme) has not paid me for transport or accommodation? Some people are really forgetting that most of the students if not all of us come from disadvantaged backgrounds, where there is no one working at home and our attendance depends on NSFAS. I think NSFAS alone encourages low self-esteem. That is why there is a high rate of absenteeism and dropouts at our campus.”

“Lack of psychosocial support affects a lot Sir (researcher). For instance, if you do not have money to come to college because of financial problems or poverty, you miss classes. For your information, there are lecturers who do not care about us whether you attend or not [laugh...]. They even tell us that they cannot repeat their lessons because of our financial problems. Those negative comments really kill our self-identity, self-esteem and well-being and we end up dropping out of college.”

From the discussions with students, it was evident that these students were still experiencing challenges such as poverty and transport money even though there was NSFAS that was supposed to pay for their accommodation or transport fees.

Participants realised the need to have training workshops on how to deal with stressful situations. The researchers gave students homework regarding stressful situations and were requested to report back on how they dealt with those stressful situations and challenges. Given the effects of stress that harm academic performance and the health of students, participants suggested that campus administrators could incorporate training for stress management during the induction of students. Participants also concluded that NSFAS offices should be decentralised and that students should receive their money on a monthly basis. The idea was proposed by Precious when she related her stressful situation:

“NSFAS is really stressing us. I wish they could at least pay us every month so that we can budget and not have problems with our studies. Receiving NSFAS after 3 months is really a problem. Honestly, something should be done about NSFAS. All of us depend on it for food, accommodation and transport. Their offices should be in our campus for us to be assisted.”

Another conclusion that participants came up with was to have NSFAS officials at the research site assist students directly when the need arises. This idea was put forward by two students, namely, Nozipho and Ntethe when they described their stressful situations and the impacts it has had on their academic lives:

“There is a big problem with the student affairs office. I think there should be someone like a supervisor to supervise them. Things that are happening at NSFAS offices are really stressing us and it is not fair. Last year, I had a problem and never received NSFAS. When I went there for assistance, I was told to buy data bundles and phone NSFAS offices. How do you expect a student to have money for data bundles if he or she has never received NSFAS? This NSFAS thing is really stressing us, and I support the idea that their offices should be decentralised in order for us to be stress-free. Ngivuma kakhulu [I fully agree on decentralisation].”

“Err...yes, we do receive NSFAS. Noma kunjalo [however] take for instance me. I do not have parents and they all passed on last year. At home, I have two young sisters (both still going to school) and two brothers who are both older than me. My one big brother is the only one who is working. He is expected to support us all financially and that is very difficult for him. Last year, I never received NSFAS for transport or accommodation. So, my brother had to do everything for us. Even this year, I am still struggling to get last year's NSFAS. That is why when I received NSFAS for this year; nayo encane name ngize ngathenga ngayo ukudla ekhaya [was very little, in such a way that I had to buy food at home with it]. ...you know Sir, as we are speaking now; there are students who did not receive NSFAS for this year. If you go to student affairs to enquire, they tell you to wait for three months and after three months, it is another three months. That is part of our daily lives here at the college.”

From the statements referred to above, it became clear that students were experiencing several challenges, which could lead to stress. The issue of stressful situations necessitated the research site to have means of support. Therefore, a workshop on how to deal with stressful situations was used to empower students.

The Role of Student Development Practitioners for Sustainable Learning at a South African TVET college

SDPs` roles at a public TVET college are important to the development of students.⁶⁰ It has been, however, noted that there are no positive relationships between college students and SDPs at South African TVET colleges. The importance of this relationship to the achievement of college students was evident when one of the students (Patience) said:

“At our college, we do have a Student Development Practitioner. However, we do not know his role because I once had a problem and went to him. Instead of assisting me, he referred me back to my lecturer for assistance”.

This statement made it clear that students do not know the roles of Student Development Practitioners. Some researchers believe that it is the responsibility of college students to initiate good relationships with their student development practitioners and to divulge their personal information, while other researchers believe that it is the responsibility of SDPs to initiate good relationships with students. During our focus group discussions, it was proposed that a South African TVET college should induct students when it comes to the roles of SDP.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the students` experiences of psychosocial support for sustainable learning at a South African TVET college. Students at TVET colleges experience a lack of academic support. Due to the lack of academic support that students experience at a TVET college, prospects for academic success are constrained. This was evident during group discussions when students proposed that peer tutoring and counselling be reinstated to deal with academic issues. The provision of academic support to students is essential for academic achievement.⁶¹ South African TVET colleges are established on the principle of providing academic support services which will assist students to develop their competencies, life skills and habits of academic excellence. Students at this TVET college experience a lack of emotional support. Lecturers lack the knowledge and skills to deal with the emotional needs of students. Lecturers need to be trained on counselling skills by SDPs for students to succeed academically. Emotional support plays a huge role in the education of TVET colleges.⁶² This experience of lacking emotional support affects students` motivation to learn and their perception of information and academic achievements.⁶³ There is also a lack of psychosocial support experienced by students at this TVET college.

Due to a lack of psychosocial support, students experience low self-esteem and stressful situations. This barrier stemmed from individual interviews and focus group discussions with students. The high level of stress disturbs the efforts of students to meet their goals. TVET college students should work towards developing their professionalism and personality by developing their identities following career interests and developing relationships.⁶⁴ If students are not supported psychosocially, they can suffer from mental disorders and emotional instability.⁶⁵ The role of SDPs in sustainable learning remains unclear at this TVET college. Hence, there are no positive relationships between students and SDPs. The role of SDPs is crucial at TVET colleges in South Africa.⁶⁶ During focus group discussions, it was proposed that this institution should induct students on the roles of SDPs. Social support from SDPs has a substantial

⁶⁰ Shannon Suldo, Amanda Thalji, and John Ferron, “Longitudinal Academic Outcomes Predicted by Early Adolescents’ Subjective Well-Being, Psychopathology, and Mental Health Status Yielded from a Dual Factor Model,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 6, no. 1 (2011): 17–30.

⁶¹ Mngomezulu and Ramathan, “Academic Intervention Experiences of ‘at-Risk’ Students in a South African University.”

⁶² Kotomina and Sazhina, “Exploring Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education: Management Programme Students in Russia.”

⁶³ Dolev and Leshem, “Developing Emotional Intelligence Competence among Teachers.”

⁶⁴ Camara, Bacigalupe, and Padilla, “The Role of Social Support in Adolescents: Are You Helping Me or Stressing Me Out?”

⁶⁵ Ongori and Agolla, “Occupational Stress in Organizations and Its Effects on Organizational Performance.”

⁶⁶ Suldo, Thalji, and Ferron, “Longitudinal Academic Outcomes Predicted by Early Adolescents’ Subjective Well-Being, Psychopathology, and Mental Health Status Yielded from a Dual Factor Model.”

impact on the emotional, social, and academic performance of students.⁶⁷ SDPs should know the well-being of students and how they learn. Students who have support from SDPs have lower rates of stress and adjust well at TVET colleges.⁶⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore recommended that officials at the institution should liaise with NSFAS officials at the national level to pay students regularly. NSFAS offices should be decentralised, which means that each college or campus should have NSFAS offices, and such offices should be continuously and closely monitored for effectiveness by the SDP. This proposal is in agreement with the observation made by.⁶⁹ It is also recommended by this study that one SRC member on campus should be trained in order to assist students with NSFAS challenges. This study also recommended that campus administrators should do the following in order to deal with stressful situations of students; identify students' stress immediately and provide support such as stress management programmes that will deal with campus students' needs, organise training on stress management in orientation activities, organise workshops on managing stress that will deal with stressors encountered by students on campus, incorporate programmes of career development into the college curriculums and design curriculums to include dealing with stress. Students are advised to practice techniques of relaxation, talk to people they love, spend more time with their friends, take part in creative activities such as drama and arts, attend a place of religious worship, and participate in sporting activities in order to deal with stressful situations. With regard to peer tutoring and peer counselling, the study found that the TVET college where the participants were drawn from does not conduct peer tutoring and peer counselling that can assist students in achieving academic success.⁷⁰ It is further recommended that peer tutoring should be reinstated in South African TVET colleges, and that the SDP should facilitate its implementation.

In addition, the study found that the campus uses a referral system that is external. This system of referral does not provide students with follow-ups in order to ensure that there is adherence when treatment is given. Campus counselling's inadequacy is caused by personnel who are not skilled and have few resources to work with. This normally denies students an opportunity to access psychosocial support on campus. The study further found that lecturers and the SDP lack counselling skills and do not know how to deal with the social and emotional needs of students on campus. Hence, counselling personnel on campus should attempt to create a learning environment that is creative and can provide safety to students.⁷¹ The campus should train lecturers to monitor students and to be able to identify students who experience psychosocial challenges. The institution should also provide necessary support to lecturers so that they can learn how to support students who experience psychosocial challenges. There should be a full-time nurse to work with the SDP to support good teaching and learning practices. However, this may not be feasible due to financial constraints experienced by most colleges in South Africa. The other recommendation is that each campus should have more than one SDP who will be assisting in training lecturers to be able to provide counselling to students, as also noted by.⁷² The SDP should provide training to campus personnel in order to equip them to deal with the social and emotional needs of students.⁷³ Structured activities that are educational should be encouraged in order to alleviate the effect of psychosocial challenges on students. Also, priority should be given to college personnel who serve in the student support services unit. This will improve the delivery of psychosocial services to students, a sentiment also shared by Muchineripi.

⁶⁷ Awang, Kutty, and Ahmad, "Perceived Social Support and Well Being: First-Year Student Experience in University."

⁶⁸ Awang, Kutty, and Ahmad, "Perceived Social Support and Well Being: First-Year Student Experience in University."

⁶⁹ Emily E Haroz et al., "What Works in Psychosocial Programming in Humanitarian Contexts in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review of the Evidence," *Intervention* 18, no. 1 (2020): 3, https://doi.org/10.4103/INTV.INTV_6_19.

⁷⁰ Gary Liguori and Barb Lonbaken, "Alcohol Consumption and Academic Retention in First-Year College Students," *College Student Journal* 49, no. 1 (2015): 69–77.

⁷¹ M. Muchineripi, "Exploring the Effectiveness of Psychological Support Services Provided to Students at Majuba TVET College, KwaZulu-Natal Province" (University of South Africa, 2017).

⁷² Camara, Bacigalupe, and Padilla, "The Role of Social Support in Adolescents: Are You Helping Me or Stressing Me Out?"

⁷³ Mohamed Dafaalla et al., "Depression, Anxiety, and Stress in Sudanese Medical Students: A Cross Sectional Study on Role of Quality of Life and Social Support," *Am J Educ Res* 4, no. 13 (2016): 937–42.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to assess students' experiences of psychosocial support for sustainable learning at a South Africa TVET college. The research established that there were many challenges experienced by students at this college. Although this study was conducted at one college, conditions at most colleges in South Africa are the same. It can therefore be inferred that students at many TVET colleges in South Africa experience challenges, which affect their academic performances. The students' experiences of low self-esteem, stressful situations, lack of peer tutoring, lack of peer counselling, lack of counselling skills from SDP, and inadequate provision of social and emotional needs at South African TVET colleges highlight the importance of establishing effective and deliberate collaboration between lecturers and SDP. These students' experiences have been worsened by a lack of counselling skills from lecturers and SDP, the unavailability of stress management programmes, and a lack of peer tutoring and peer counselling. Lecturers and SDPs hold a professional responsibility to work together as they are members of the college and should thus be equipped with the requisite skills needed to support the needs of students. The collaborative effort from all stakeholders will thus give a true meaning to the old African adage that says, 'it takes a village to raise a child (student)'.

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The authors contributed to the study design, collected the data and conducted the analysis and interpretation. The authors critically revised the paper and contributed to the revision of the manuscript. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The datasets during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Michael Mbongiseni Buthelezi, PhD in Educational Psychology has worked as a Senior Lecturer at a South African TVET college for 13 years. He is currently working as a Lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities, School of Education, University of Limpopo in Limpopo Province in South Africa. His research interests include student development, sustainable learning, psychosocial support, and inclusive education. He has published two articles and presented papers both nationally and internationally.

Joseph Dipane Hlalele, PhD in Educational Psychology is a full professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. His research interests include sustainable learning, community engagement, inclusive education and rural education. He has published more than fifty academic research papers, four book chapters, and graduated more than twenty six doctoral students.