CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF SUICIDES COMMITTED BY PUPILS IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

AGRIPPA MADODA DWANGU

Department of Education, Steve Vukile Tshwete Complex,
Zwelitsha, Eastern Cape, Republic of South Africa

ABSTRACT

Purpose - The purpose of this article was to navigate and investigate the causes, manifestations, and ramifications of suicides committed by students in South African Schools; more especially in so far as how these impact the wellness of school communities (parents, teachers, non–teaching staff, and students themselves) in schools affected.

Design/Methodology/Approach - The methodology that was used in the study is the Qualitative Research Methodology. Data collection and analysis were done through Literature Review by examining print media reports, journal articles, and data from published works of other researchers around the world. The approach adopted was the interpretive approach. The aim in using this approach was to explore and understand what the causative factors of suicides committed by pupils in schools are, in the world in general and in South Africa in particular. It was also to further establish what the ramifications of the suicides are in the emotional wellness of pupils and school communities affected. Ultimately, the purpose was also to come up with strategies that could be employed to circumvent the occurrence and adverse effects of suicides committed by students in schools, first on students themselves, and secondly, on school communities in general.

Interpretation is the most challenging part of qualitative research (Bakhshi, Weisi, and Yousofi 2019). Data must be interpreted on the basis of data collected to produce theories. Most of the questions that the researcher in this study needed to answer to interpret data were the 'why', the 'how', and the 'what' questions. Answers to these questions had to be tested for their trustworthiness through triangulation. Triangulation is described as an approach where the researcher uses either multiple methods, several theories, or different data sources - in time and space (Jentoft and Olsen 2019). By using triangulation, researchers have an opportunity to gain a better and broader understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The use of different methods and sources of data collection helps to support a finding by showing that independent measures agree with it, or at least, do not contradict it. This is the strategy that the researcher used in this study to interpret data. Finally, to ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretations, the researcher in this study compared the results and ideas as they came up from sources of available literature, media reports, Journal Articles, and published works of other researchers on the topic at hand to come up with recommendations.

Findings – The finding from this study is that the prevalence and gravity of suicides committed by students and the effects thereof, on the wellness of students in schools in South Africa, are

extremely disastrous and too immense to ignore. Parents and teachers are not doing enough to engage students in the social-ills that lead to them committing suicide.

Findings further point to an indication that parents and teachers tend to take lightly the seriousness of the impact that the challenges that pupils face have on their emotional being. A revelation that comes out of the studies conducted is that in most instances parents and teachers themselves are to blame for incidents of pupil suicides that occur. They either fail to see the red flags or act carelessly on the red flags that they see by making disturbing utterances and insinuations that push children into committing suicide.

Research limitations/implications – The study was based only on the available literature, including journal articles and media reports. There was no information gathered directly from the pupils themselves for the purpose of getting from their personal experiences of factors that contribute to them committing suicide. The majority of the pupils in schools are under age and this made it difficult for the researcher to involve them in interviews on such a sensitive matter as suicide without the consent of their parents. The Research Code of Ethics does not allow researchers to carry out interviews with underage children without the consent of their parents.

Practical implications – Findings in this study will go a long way in assisting both the Department of Basic Education and teachers in schools to curb deaths resulting from suicide ideations on the part of learners in schools. The findings will also constitute an integral part of the literature that educators and educationists can use to mitigate the prevalence of suicide ideation and the commission of suicide by pupils in schools.

Originality/value – The study provides not only an insight into the glaringly high prevalence of suicides among pupils but also and more importantly, a theoretical and empirical contribution to the existing literature on the causative factors of suicide ideation and consequences thereof. It offers practical recommendations for the effective management of the devastating effects of the high incidents of suicides among pupils in schools.

Keywords: Suicide, ideation, incidence, mitigation, prevention.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Suicide is defined as the intentional act of ending one's life and is rated as the second leading cause of death, after unintentional injuries, among high school pupils ranging from 14 – 18 years of age (Khuzwayo, Taylor, and Connol, 2018). Glenn, Kleiman, Kellerman, Pollak, Cha, Esposito, Porter, Wyman, and Boatman (2020) rate suicide in general as the leading cause of death among youth worldwide. In support of Glenn et.al (2020), Ruch, Sheftal, Schlagbaum, Rausch, Campo and Bridge (2019) agree with this assertion by saying that suicide is the leading cause of death among youth aged 10 – 19 in the United States, with rates traditionally higher in male than in female youth. This is a cause for concern if the youth are to take their lives at the rate that has been stated, hence this study. Local studies identify psychopathology (especially depression) and family relationship issues as the most common risk factors of suicide and self-harm, and impulsive control issues are an additional factor contributing to self-harm (Siu, 2019). This means that the combating of suicide ideation and deaths in schools is not something that should be left to schools and the Department of Education only, especially if family relations are partly to blame for these effects. It is a scourge for which the efforts and

strategies to combat should be declared a societal matter. In any given single family, one death is one too many. The family, therefore, should advisably take the centre stage in playing an active role in proactively fighting against suicide ideation by children of school-going age. During 2019, a total of 18.8% of students was reported as having seriously considered suicide, with prevalence estimates highest among females at 24.1%; white non-Hispanic students (those with ancestry from countries whose primary language is not Spanish including countries like Brazil, Portugal, Philippines, and South Africa) were reported as standing at 19.1% in prevalence; students who reported having sex with persons of the same sex or with both sexes had their prevalence at 54.2%; and students who identified themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual sitting at 46.8%. (Ivey- Stephenson, Demissie, Crosby, Stone, Gaylor, Wilkins, Lowry, and Brown, 2020). These figures are high enough to warrant a decisive action being taken, sooner than later, to save the lives of the young ones on whose hands the future solid socio-economic standing of any nation depends. This is the main reason why this study was embarked upon.

2.0 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The study is informed by reports from the print media houses and the national television in South Africa that have become the order of the day of suicides by students. According to these reports, a remarkable number of children in schools are losing their lives through suicide. In the reports there is commonly a mention that a suicide note has been left behind by a student who has committed suicide to indicate why they resorted to taking their lives. It appears that these suicide notes are not taken seriously enough by parents and teachers. If they took them seriously they would take lessons that would help them circumvent the recurrence of such incidents. This is what makes it even more necessary for researchers to take it upon themselves to investigate factors leading to this kind of catastrophe, hence this study.

There are numerous reports that make headlines in newspapers across the globe of incidents of pupils that have committed suicide for one reason or another. For instance, there are instances where pupils commit suicide immediately they learn that they have not done well in an examination paper, or in examinations in their entirety. A Grade 12 pupil from Umqhele Secondary School in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu Natal Education Department committed suicide after writing her isiZulu Paper 1 in the morning (IOL, 9 November 2022). It is believed that the child had not done well in the paper and could not take the pain that this caused in him.

In some instances pupils resort to committing suicide as a result of the irresponsible behaviour and actions of teachers. Many pupils are reported to have committed suicide after being mocked and harassed by teachers in school. The Gauteng Education Department has confirmed that a PJ Simelane Secondary School 15-year-old pupil took his own life after being mocked by his teacher for being gay (Eyewitness News, 20 august 2022). A female teacher in this case had made homophobic comments about the learner's sexuality in front of the whole class. When the school closed for the day the pupil decided to take his life on arrival at home. In another incident, pupils from various schools in the Maqheleng area in Ficksburg converged and embarked on a protest action on Tlotlisong Secondary School after a pupil committed suicide after being bullied by a teacher (Eyewitness News, 20 august 2022). In this case the pupil concerned left a suicide note to say that he could not take the bullying that a teacher continued

to mete out on him anymore. He did not give any detail of how the teacher concerned was bullying him in the suicide note.

A similar incident had previously occurred in Gauteng. The Gauteng Department of Education dispatched a team of psychologists to Doornpoort Primary School in Pretoria after a 13-year-old pupil committed suicide after being bullied (Sowetan Live, 20 February 2019). The girl committed suicide after a video of herself naked started doing rounds on WhatsApp among her classmates. This happened after an incident of cyberbullying occurred where a Grade 7 pupil had threatened to distribute the video depicting her naked. The learner had reported the threat to her life science teacher. However, the teacher did not do anything on that day about the matter because the accused learner had already left school. The teacher had planned to take the necessary disciplinary steps the following day when the accused learner was back to school. Unfortunately the deceased learner did not return to school as she had already taken her life.

There are more incidents of pupils who commit suicide as a result of being bullied, not by teachers only, but by their schoolmates as well. A grade 9 pupil from Sonyongwane High School in Creighton in the Southern KwaZulu Natal was found dead with a suicide note next to her (The Citizen, 30 January 2023). She stated in the suicide note that she was bullied by other pupils who were consistently telling her that she was ugly, and in the process, teasing her about the shape of her head.

It also seems that parents have a finger on some incidents of suicides committed by their own children. A student who jumped off a building and killed himself left a suicide note via YouTube blaming his parents for failing to guide him (News18, 22 July 2022). The student from the Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIITM) stated in the suicide note that he committed suicide because he had suffered trauma and depression in the hands of his parents since childhood. He was raped as a child and did not receive any support or protection from the parents. The parents were also abusive and had fought violently in front of him. He stated categorically in the suicide note that it was for lack of proper guidance from parents that he ended up taking his life.

Other factors leading to pupils committing suicide relate to the pupils' personal problems which parents are either not aware of or they fail to appreciate the value of providing the children with proper guidance on the personal challenges that they find themselves faced with. An 11year old boy from Michigan's Upper Peninsula hanged himself after he had learnt from a text message carrying false information that had been sent by the friend of his girlfriend that his girlfriend had died (The Washington Post, 11 April 2017). The mother of the young boy described his son as so innocent, so kind-hearted, yet so naive that he completely believed the naughty false message he had received from his girlfriend's friend as true. His girlfriend had not died, but her friend was just teasing him. According to the mother of the boy, this was just "a twisted joke" delivered in the form of cyberbullying on social media. She said that she wanted to raise awareness about how social media platforms influence children's actions. This points to the importance of children opening up to their parents about all the ups and downs that they are faced with in their individual personal lives on a daily basis.

A boy of 13 years of age in the Dumaneni village of Olundi in KwaZulu Natal committed suicide after complaining of being rejected by his biological parents who were supposed to love him (Zimoja lezinto, 25 March 2023). The 13 year old boy felt unwanted after his mother

left him to live in abject poverty with his grandmother when he was 9 years old. His father had left the family and vanished in thin air even before he started schooling. He had no idea of the whereabouts of the father and no one in the family ever provided him with any information even when he enquired. One day, after asking his grandmother why he had been rejected by his parents he was found hanging from a tree and dead already.

The suicide of a Grade 12 learner at Rhenish Girls High School in Stellenbosch in Cape Town has brought to 19 the number of learners that have taken their own lives over the last two years (Cape Argus, 27 May 2021). This is an incident that left students with so much shock and sorrow that they gathered in their numbers outside the school to pay their last respects by laying flowers against the fence. Another 15 year old Grade 10 learner in a separate incident had hung herself from a sick bay at Scottsville High school the previous week (Cape Argus, 27 May 2021).

These are just but some of the stories in the print media that prompted the researcher to embark on this study. In all these cases, the other pupils and staff in each of the schools were left so traumatised by the death of a pupil that Departmental Officials had to secure the services of social workers and psychologists to help them come to terms with the situation. It is unacceptable that the children could lose their lives in this manner and the adult community does nothing about it; hence this contribution from my side.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Factors leading to suicide thoughts among adolescents:

3.1.1 Biological Factors: Runcan (2020) identifies the following as biological factors that are associated with teenage suicidal behaviour:

3.1.1.1 Ethnicity: Alaskan Natives or Native American adolescents have a 2.4 times higher rate of suicide than the national average; Hispanic adolescents have a higher rate of suicide attempts than African American or Caucasian adolescents; Latina adolescents report attempting suicide more often than African American or Caucasian adolescents.

3.1.1.2 Gender: There is an assertion that male adolescents suppress their feelings, while female adolescents express them, and suicide is their easy way out to rid themselves of a stressful situation. It appears that American female adolescents become suicidal over relationship issues, while suicidal male adolescents worry more about achievement. Although anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts have higher rates among female adolescents (who use drug overdose and poisoning to take their lives); male adolescents (who use firearms) are four times more likely to commit suicide.

3.1.1.3 Sexual Orientation: Gay and bisexual male adolescents have higher rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts than heterosexual male adolescents because of the increased risk of parental rejection, peer rejection, social stigma, and victimisation.

3.1.1.4 Family stress and conflict (often caused by academic failure, death of a loved person, military deployment of one of the parents, parental divorce, physical abuse, relationship breakup, sexual abuse): These may cause the adolescents to act impulsively or

become overwhelmed. They contribute to feelings of despair or hopelessness, or make adolescents feel more vulnerable. The failure to construct a healthy identity is identified as one of the factors underlying suicide concerns. Bullying at home is related to suicide behaviour in Pakistani adolescents. Pain and tension are among the causes of suicidal thoughts in Norwegian adolescents.

3.1.1.5 Low self-concept, low self-esteem, low social self-concept, and poor social skills: These may make the adolescents (particularly female adolescents) feel isolated or rejected. The role of self-esteem in suicide attempts is however deemed to be questionable. Overweight among the causes of suicidal thoughts is cited as prominent among Norwegian adolescents. Other factors associated with social skills that contribute to suicides being committed by pupils include information and communication technologies (Internet, mass media). The Internet can provide adolescents with information about how to commit suicide. Media coverage of a suicide may lead to suicide clusters (suicide contagion). There seems to be a relationship between cyberbullying and suicidal behaviour, with the former being causative to the latter among American adolescents. There is also a relationship between Internet use and suicidal behaviour among British adolescents. The finding is that internet use and self-harm or suicidal behaviour is associated with high levels of Internet addiction. Among American adolescents suicide statements that are made on MySpace have been found to be constituting part of suicidal intentions and thoughts. Depression, low self-esteem, and suicidality are impacted by social media because of the availability of suicide stories. Social media has been identified as being greatly responsible for symptoms of anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, impulsiveness, inattention, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder among American adolescents. Facebook has also been identified as a stressor in Canadian adolescents that have anxiety disorders.

3.1.2 Bullying Victimization: Koyanagi, Oh, Carvalho, Smith, Haro, Vancampfort, Stubbs and DeVylder (2019) identify bullying victimization as an important risk factor that contributes to suicide attempts among adolescents globally; and there is an urgent need to implement effective and evidence-based interventions to curb it. Azami and Taremian (2020) also support this assertion by saying that traditional bullying (or peer bullying) is considered a common and unpleasant experience among students and has serious consequences such as mental health problems and suicidal ideations. Azami and Taremian (2020) take this further to say that in recent years, another type of bullying named cyberbullying has emerged as a growing problem with negative effects on school achievement, physiology, and mental health of its victims. The rapid and widespread development of social networking sites has created a venue for an increase in cyberbullying among adolescents and protective mechanisms and actions must be considered, such as how proximal family factors can prevent self-harm and suicidal behaviors among adolescents exposed to cyberbullying (Nguyen, Nakamura, Seino, and Vo. 2020). Be that as it may, this reality about cyberbullying does not mean that other forms of bullying, including physical and emotional bullying, should be taken lightly in so far as causality for suicidal ideation among adolescents is concerned. Gong, Zhang, Li, Wang, Wu, Guo, and Lu (2020) have expressly stated that the interpersonal theory of suicide proposes that adverse experiences such as childhood maltreatment, physically and emotionally, can form a state of adaptation to pain, can reduce the victim's fear of self-harm, and can eventually contribute to suicidal behaviour.

3.1.3 Stigma related to sexuality and children's sexual relations: The attitude that the adult community and society in general has on issues of sexuality and sexual relations among children of school going age constitutes a major risk factor on their suicidal thoughts. Parents find it very difficult to accept that their children become so sexually active in their teens that they inevitably find themselves in a situation where they make sexual choices and involve themselves in sexual relationships or sexual activities. It is a situation that makes it extremely difficult for children of school going age to express themselves to their parents about their feelings regarding sex and sexuality.

Sex, on the one hand, can be defined as people labelled male, female, sexqueer, transgender (people choosing to be considered to be the opposite sex to the one biologically assigned to them at birth in relation to social and cultural matters) and intersex (people born with a combination of male and female biological traits), for whom "sex" refers to "sex-related bodily features that are … biological… evolved, physical and/or innate (e.g., vulvas, penises, breasts, body shape) (Fausto-Sterling, 2019). Sex may also be a word used to describe one's internal sense of self. In other words, sex is a word that can be used to tell how you see yourself in relation to sex- related bodily features – whether you see yourself as male or female or sexless, etc. It is about an individual's self-concept in relation to sex-related bodily features. The term 'sexqueer' refers to people who cannot tell whether they are male or female as a result of surgical operations that they have taken themselves through. They surgically change their original sex into opposite sex for the purpose of having sex with people of their original sex. For instance, a male will have his sex changed to that of a female so that he may have sex with males.

On the other hand, sexuality is defined by whom one has sex with, in what ways, why, and with what outcomes (Gupta, 2000). Sexuality goes beyond oneself - to relations between self and others. Sexuality is about how one derives sexual pleasure through diverse physical and psychological satisfactions of sexual experience, and key enabling factors, such as self-determination, consent, safety, privacy, confidence, and the ability to communicate and negotiate sexual relations (Mitchell, Lewis, O'Sullivan, and Fortenberry, 2021).

The matter that adult community needs to understand therefore is that pupils of school going age, especially in their teens, are preoccupied with issues of establishing what their identity is in relation to sex and sexuality. They want to know whether they are male or female, whether they want to be transgender, transqueer, or remain what they are, whether they are intersex (both male and female at the same time) or endosex in terms of their biological bodily features. Endosex is a term that refers to people whose sex characteristics meet medical and social norms for typically 'male' or 'female'. Children in their teens also want to get themselves settled in so far as what their sexual orientations are. They want to know who they are attracted to when it comes to sex. Their pre-occupation with these issues leads sometimes to confusion and frustration. The moment they cannot find solutions in regard to their status around matters of sex and sexuality, stress, depression, and finally suicidal ideations creep in. Others end up committing suicide as a result of these issues they cannot resolve.

3.1.4   A persistent violent atmosphere at home or at school: Elov and Berdiyeva (2022) expressly state that the impact of conditions of upbringing and the accumulation of criminal characteristics at home and in society negatively affect the emotional development of

adolescents to a point where depression and suicidal thoughts in them become an inevitable consequence.

Studies on parenting and adolescent outcome have revealed that parenting with high control and harsh parenting, called the authoritarian parenting style, lead to negative outcomes such as depression, diminished academic success, self-harm, and suicidal ideation in their adolescent children (Banstola, Ogino, and Inoue, 2020). Nur, Setyaningrum, and Novandita (2021) distinguish between the authoritarian style of parenting and the authoritative style of parenting. By authoritarian parenting, on the one hand, is meant the type of parenting that is extremely strict, fixative, and uncompromising where children are expected to follow the rules set by parents without the parents entertaining any questioning from children, or entering into any discussions with them around those rules (Nur et al. 2021). Parents with authoritarian style are not accommodative of the views and the feelings of their children. They have extremely high expectations of their children, yet they have nothing or very little to offer by way of feedback or nurturing. Authoritarian parenting is the direct opposite of authoritative parenting. Authoritative parenting, on the other hand, is parenting where parents have higher knowledge about the development of self-esteem in adolescents compared to parents practicing authoritarian parenting, have a better practice score on overall communication with children, relations, involvement in personal affairs of their children, support , positive reinforcement, appreciation and praise to their children (Banstola et al. 2020). Children growing up under authoritarian parenting are more prone to suicidal ideations than children growing up under authoritative parenting. Children growing up in homes where squabbles and fights between parents are the order of the day while children are looking on prove to be having suicidal ideations in children and they finally commit suicide.

Mamun, Chandrima, and Griffiths (2023) narrate chilling stories of children of school going age in Bogra in Bangladesh who committed suicide as a result of fights between parents. One story relates to a student whose father insisted that he completes online tests because he had arranged for a broadband connection. The son was determined to do the tests on campus, much against the idea that his father had come up with. Consequently, a huge fierce argument between the father and mother around this matter ensued as the son felt oppressed by his father. Later that evening, the son's parents had further arguments about the situation. As a result of the arguments, both the mother and son engaged in a suicide pact and killed themselves the next day after the father had left for work. The mother (aged 47 years) and her son committed suicide by ingesting poisonous gas tablets in a forest close to where they lived. Mamun et al. (2023) found that the death of the son is attributable to the violent behaviour of the parents in the family and they find such behaviour as generally a risk factor to suicide ideation among children of school going age. Similarly; Ohtaki, Doki, Kaneko, Hirai, Oi, Sasahara, and Matsuzaki (2019) support this view by saying that family breakdown is a high risk factors contributing to suicidal ideations and suicides among adolescents. Family breakdown includes issues of maternal mental health, economic problems, frequent changes in the living environment and family structure, as well as incest. Family breakdown involves dysfunction at home owing to factors such as discord, separation, violence and some toxic situations such as alcohol and drug abuse arising from family conflict and poor quality of family relationships. Incest is described as sexual union between family members or inbreeding between siblings (Ardani, 2020). Incest encompasses not only sexual behaviour involving contact, but also temptation, such as when a mother regards her son as her husband; or the husband regards his

daughter as his wife. In such instances, suicidal behaviour is caused by the resultant impulsivity and aggression towards perpetrators. The trauma that incest causes exacerbates emotional vulnerability, strengthens impulsivity and suicidality. In cultures where incest is regarded as taboo, children who have been through incestuous unions experience unbearable feelings of guilt as they sometimes believe that they are to blame for the violation of the cultural norm of observing incest as taboo. (Gullestad (2020). The pain inflicted in them by their own relatives thus becomes too unbearable to them to live with. The children develop a lack of trust in people they have sexual relationships with; and as such they struggle to establish safe and stable relationships. This leads to stress, depression and ultimately suicidal ideations and suicide.

3.1.5 Underperformance in Academic Work:

When children come to realise that they are not coping with school work, they tend to develop suicidal ideations which in turn subsequently lead to them committing suicide. Bilal and Riaz (2020) hold that there are many factors contributing towards increasing trend of suicide in students, including competitiveness, academic stress and pressure, exam stress and anxiety, and poor academic achievement. The link of academic stress and suicidal ideation in adolescents is more pronounced in Asian countries than in countries in the other continents of the world (Bilal and Riaz, 2020). Academic excellence in the context of Asian countries is held in high esteem; and as such it is seen as a vehicle for upward mobility in one's cultural status. This has led to adolescents experiencing immense pressure to perform exceptionally well in the academic domain. Failure to meet one's own expectations puts adolescents at increased risk to experience stress which could lead to feeling hopeless and develop suicidal ideation.

The African continent, South Africa included, is not immune to suicidal ideations and suicides by High School students. AlAzzam, Abuhammad, Tawalbeh, and Dalky (2021) assert that the most significant predictor of suicidality is anxiety and depression among high school students. Despite interventions by low and middle-income countries toward the achievement of the global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on promoting mental health and well-being of their populace by the year 2030, suicidal behaviours continue to be major causes of premature mortality, especially among High School students (Seidu, Amu, Dadzie, Amoah, Ahinkorah, Ameyaw, Acheampong, and Kissah-Korsah, 2020). Farhangpour, Mutshaeni, and Maluleke (2019) have linked suicidal ideations and suicides among High School students in South Africa with cyberbullying. They found that even though students in the rural High Schools have access to the latest cyber technology, they are not equipped enough to prevent or cope with its negative effects; hence, they suffer in solitude and end up committing suicide.

Nakano, Yamazaki, Teshirogi, Kubo, Ogawa, Kameo, Inoue, and Koyama (2022) point out in no unequivocal terms that worries about school life, interpersonal relationships at school, family life, interpersonal relationships at home, and academic performance are each associated with a high risk of suicidal ideation, while support from school staff, support from family members, and trustful relationships between classmates are significant protective factors against suicidal ideation.

3.2 Strategies to prevent suicidal thoughts and suicides among High School Students.

There are numerous ways in which parents and teachers can reduce or prevent suicidal thoughts and suicides among students in schools. The following are just but some of them:

3.2.1 Early detection of symptoms that could lead to suicidal ideations.

Nurkhodjaev, Babarakhimova, and Abdullaeva (2020) contend that adolescents at risk of suicide have specific traits of character which include, inter alia, lack of confidence, timidity, social rejection, feeling useless and worthless, focusing on appearance imperfections, passive attitude, feeling helpless in difficult situations and conflicts, which occur in the rapidly changing society. These should not be taken for granted. Parents need to be able to detect these symptoms and attended to them as early as in the puberty stage of children's development by providing the necessary support in difficult situations that children get confronted with. This can be done through communication and guidance, as well as instilling in children self-confidence and trust in others. Parents should encourage children to believe in themselves by praising them for even the little achievements that they make. They should help children to feel accepted in society by regularly assuring them that they have something of value that they can offer to others, socially (by way of fostering good interpersonal relations with others), emotionally (by providing emotional support to others that are in need of comfort and solace), morally (by presenting themselves as models for acceptable behaviour), as well as physically (by participating in athletic and sporting events). Early detection of dysfunctional and ambivalent families and destructive parenting by teachers at schools is of paramount importance for adolescent suicide prevention and reduction of the suicide potential. There should be immediate and constant interaction between parents and teachers to mitigate factors that could lead to self-harm and suicide among children.

3.2.2 Identification of vulnerable groups.

It is of utmost importance to note that adolescence is a developmental stage often characterized by rapid and extensive physical and psychosocial changes (Ivey- Stephenson, Demissie, Crosby, Stone, Gaylor, Wilkins, Lowry, and Brown, 2020). It is a period in children's lives that is characterised by expanded identity development, with sexual identity development showing complex, multidimensional, and often stressful processes. The potential dissonance between sexual identity and behaviour and the social rejection sexual minority youths often experience can contribute to increased suicidal ideation and behaviours along with an increased risk for suicide (Ivey-Stephen et al. 2020). It is a stage that requires of parents to be on the alert and ready to assist their children with the choices they want to make in respect of their sex and sexuality. It is a stage during which parents should start communicating with their children on matters of sex and sexuality. It is the responsibility of parents and teachers to make children feel accepted regardless of the choices they make in respect of sex and sexuality.

Adolescence is a period during which children need to be assured by both the parents at home and teachers at school that they should not be discriminated against because of the decisions they make in respect of their sex and sexuality. It is a period in which vulnerability on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersect and asexual (LGBTIQA+) people begins to show its ugly head.

LGBTIQA+ children also deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, like any other person. Failure to do so can lead to feelings of rejection which in turn lead to suicide and suicide ideations among students in schools. The meaning of sex and sexuality was dealt with in detail in paragraph 3.1.3 above.

3.2.3 Other interventions to prevent or reduce suicide ideations and suicides.

There can be no one size fits all approach to preventing and reducing suicide ideation among school pupils. Selective strategies address specific groups, such as adolescents with mental health problems and harmful use of substances,that are at increased risk for suicidal behaviour, (Wasserman, Carli, Iosue, Javed, and Herrman, 2021).

Wasserman et al (2021) have found that:

- Globally, boys commonly use hanging and firearms while girls typically use poisoning by pesticides or drugs, and jumping from heights. It would be useful therefore to restrict access to lethal means such as firearms and other dangerous weapons in the case of suicidal boy children, while for both boy and girl suicidal children it could prove useful to put in place structural interventions at jumping sites and restricting access to highly hazardous pesticides.
- The Good Behaviour Game (GBG) is a classroom behaviour management strategy, aimed at socializing children for the student role and reducing aggressive and disruptive behaviour. It targets kindergartners or first-graders and it is implemented by the classroom teacher. Although this program is not specifically aimed at suicide prevention, it has an impact on major risk factors such as aggression and poor social integration.
- Signs of Suicide (SOS) curriculum designed to raise awareness of suicide and a screening for depression and other risk factors associated with suicidal behaviour could bear fruits.
- Several risk behaviours, such as tobacco smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, early sexual initiation and risky sexual behaviour have been associated with increased suicidality among adolescents and should be avoided at all cost.
- Digital health interventions have a great potential to increase early detection of mental health needs and access to care. Computerized cognitive behavioural therapy has been shown to improve depression and anxiety symptoms among adolescents and young adults.

In support of Wasserman et al (2021); Siu (2019) suggests selective prevention strategies identified from local and overseas literature, as follows: (1) restriction of access to means of suicide; (2) guidelines for responsible media reporting of suicides; (3) provision of quality mental healthcare to at-risk populations; (4) school-based screening and prevention programs; (5) online prevention, monitoring, and support programs; and (6) life skills training programs.

4.0 RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this study is qualitative research method. Jackson, Drummond, and Camara (2007) see qualitative research as research that is primarily concerned with understanding human beings' experiences in a humanistic, interpretive context by employing diverse methodologies, including those focusing on analysis and evaluation of text. This definition captures the essence of the approach that the researcher used in this study. The definition is also consistent with the recent definitions of qualitative research that authors have advanced. Aspers and Corte (2021 define qualitative research as an iterative process in which improved

understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied. Qualitative research involves a process of continuously improving a concept, a design, or a product. Data in this study was collected by way of literature review, as well as examining journal articles and media reports. The importance of interpretation in qualitative research cannot be overemphasized. Interpretation is a matter not of following mechanical rules, but of performing a thorough and comprehensive analysis while having the courage to search for the underlying meaning of the verbatim text (Lindgren, Lundman, and Graneheim, 2020). Mezmir (2020) takes this point further to say that qualitative data analysis is the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning- making in the material and what is represented in it. Meaning-making can refer to subjective or social meanings. In carrying out qualitative data analysis the researcher needs to engage in transforming raw data by searching, evaluating, recognizing, coding, mapping, exploring and describing patterns, trends, themes and categories in the raw data, in order to interpret them and provide their underlying meanings This is the context in which the interpretation of data was done in this study.

5.0 DISCUSSIONS, ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The finding from the data collected in this study points to the harsh reality that suicidal ideations and suicides among school children constitute an inevitable part of our daily existence worldwide. The numerous reports from print media houses highlighted above show in no uncertain terms that school children continue to lose their lives through suicides. This is the reality that parents and teachers cannot afford to turn a blind eye on, or shy away from. They have to accept that they have a role to play if the loss of young lives through suicides is to be circumvented.

It cannot be disputed, given the kind of data collected in this study for instance, that today's crop of children are faced with many challenges that impact negatively on their emotions. These include challenges relating to their sex and sexuality, violent fights between parents and family squabbles, divorce, the high rate of mortality that leaves children without parents as a result of pandemic diseases, alcohol and drug abuse, poverty that results from the joblessness and the high rate of unemployment affecting youth and parents, coping with pressure that schooling itself puts on them since they are expected to pass tests and examinations, difficulty to access education for reason of long distances to schools and lack of transport, bullying by fellow pupils and teachers at school, lack of technology required for them to do their work – especially in rural schools to mention but a few.

Another important finding in this study is that a suicide in a school is extremely devastating to pupils and the school community, especially the staff and families affected. Suicide causes the individuals affected to be unable to cope and to struggle to respond to the situation. In most instances, when a suicide occurs the staff becomes uncertain of what steps to take because of shock. A recommendation in this regard is that each school should be provided with at least one social worker and a psychologist as part of the staff establishment of the school. Staff provisioning by the Department of Education should be considered incomplete unless there is a social worker and a psychologist. These two will have a responsibility to carry out awareness campaigns in the school for both the staff and learners about suicide ideation and suicide. They

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are reasonably adequately equipped with information as to what to do in the event a suicide occurs. On that score, it then becomes their duty to advise and guide teachers on what to do immediately a suicide occurs in the school. Such guidance should revolve around the issue of contacting the family of the student who has died, offering condolences and providing comfort on behalf of the school to all affected parties, informing the District Office of the occurrence of suicide in the school, as well as ensuring the restoration of calm and normality of operations in the school.

The social workers assigned to work in schools should also be entrusted with the responsibility to workshop parents on how to communicate with their children on the challenges that they are facing as adolescents. Parents should be trained on how to cause children to open up about situations that cause them to be unhappy. They should also be trained by social workers on how to maintain healthy relationships with their children by practicing authoritative rather than authoritarian parenting styles.

As another recommendation, it would also serve the school communities well if school children were to have children's parliaments at District Level wherein they discuss matters impacting negatively on their lives. It would then be in these parliaments that they, themselves, come up with policies that should guide how suicide ideations and suicides could be circumvented. It is easy for learners to open up about their situations if they are provided with space and time to talk amongst themselves that to talk to parents. The policies that they come up with in these parliaments should then be validated and approved by officials in the Social Support Services Sections of the District offices.

Parents should be encouraged to keep dangerous weapons and poisonous substances under lock and key away from the reach of children. While all awareness campaigns on suicidal ideations can be put in place as recommended in this study, there can be no guarantee that suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts may not occur. They should be on the alert to see the red flags at all times in respect of suicidal ideations and intervene immediately. They must not wait until a disaster occurs. All adult members in families should play a pivotal role in curbing isolation and sadness among children.

Social media platforms can also be used for the combating of suicide attempts and suicidal ideations. These can be used to build connections with specific help centres, mass audiences, stakeholders and influencers. Social media platforms can be used to create help share crisis lines and to get through to as many people as possible. They can be used to get people interconnected so they may share their personal stories for purposes of intervention in case such stories have potential to lead to suicide ideations and suicide attempts. Because of the usefulness of technology, especially smartphones, the world has become so wired that most people get plugged into the virtual world the moment they wake up in the morning till dawn when they go to bed again. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube which are all available on smartphones have made life so easy for the present generation that very few can afford to stay without a smartphone. A smartphone is a powerful means of easy access to friends, family, news and a lot of "Do It Yourself" information. This, however, does not take away the reality that cell phone usage as part of modern technology is also a disastrous cause for anxiety, insomnia, stress and depression; all of which could, in turn, lead to suicidal

ideations and suicides. The usage of this technology by children can lead to addiction and needs to be closely monitored by both the teachers at school and parents at home.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Unless parents and teachers come to realise that the world we live in is so overwhelmed with challenges for children of school-going-age that they literally cannot make it on their own without a dedicated support system of their parents and teachers. Communication lines between children and parents and teachers should be kept honestly open at all times. The negative impact of the modern technology and mobile phones on the lives of the young ones should not be taken lightly. Whilst these have since become an essential part of our daily existence, their contribution to suicidal thoughts cannot be underestimated. The whole world is fast becoming over- dependent to technology and smartphones; yet the high levels of the usage thereof may be extremely damaging to the brain structure and functioning of the individuals in society. Children should use technological equipment and smartphones under the strict supervision of the adults to prevent depression that may lead to suicidal thoughts and suicides. Parents should also desist from putting too much pressure on children to meet the standards they sent for them, more especially in so far as tests and examinations in schools are concerned. The role of parents and teachers should be more on providing the necessary support and guidance that dictating to children what and what not to do.

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