

Psychosocial support helps students with adverse childhood experiences achieve academic success by improving their emotional regulation, concentration, and motivation, thereby enhancing their ability to learn and perform in school.



COMMUNITY KEEPERS

BRINGING HOPE FOR WELL-BEING

|| Amy Potgieter
Community Keepers

As a young South African high school student, I was privileged to have my first encounter with mental health services at school, where we had a full-time school psychologist. I remember thinking, "Wow, all I need to do is walk down the hallway and there is a safe place where I can say, 'I'm not okay.'" Even though I didn't have the statistics to back me up, I knew in my gut that this was not the reality for all children in South Africa.

Pediatrician Dr. Joycelyn Elders once said, “You can’t be what you don’t see.” Looking back, I suspect it was my experience in high school that sparked a curiosity and interest that would later turn into a career as a school counselor for Community Keepers.

The Challenge — Setting the Scene

Imagine trying to learn the 7 times table or read a book while riding on a high-speed rollercoaster. This is what life feels like for many South African children. They wake up troubled by the struggles they face in their everyday lives; then, they must make their way to school and try to concentrate in the classroom. At night, they go to bed feeling overwhelmed and some have nowhere to turn. Adverse childhood experiences (including poverty, loss, neglect, or exposure to violence and abuse) have a direct impact on mental health and our sense of well-being. These young people live on high alert.



“A whopping two-thirds of children (63%) in South Africa live below the upper-bound poverty line. Nearly one in two children (42%) have experienced violence, including physical violence (35%) and sexual abuse (35%). In some parts of the country, almost all children have either witnessed or experienced violence in their homes, schools and/or communities.”¹

If we picture these adverse childhood experiences as bricks, our learners come to school with a backpack full of them. When this burden is not lifted, young people struggle under the weight and find concentrating in the classroom to be a challenge. Over time, this situation can spiral into disruptive or risky behaviors, disengagement, or dropping out.

The challenges are well documented, but limited state funding means that few well-being contact centers or initiatives are available in communities or



schools. Yet schools, where young people gather every weekday, remain the ideal place to reach them.

The Hope

While school is primarily a space for learning and academic growth, learners also have the opportunity while there to build connections, develop their personalities, and gain life experience. School impacts subjective well-being, which positions it as a potential protective factor for learners.²

Seeing both the gap and the opportunity, Community Keepers introduced a school-based mental health and well-being model. We have seen encouraging results. When learners are given a safe space to talk to a supportive adult who truly listens, they can find hope, resolve trauma, break free from the downward spiral, and begin a journey toward a place of well-being where they can thrive. We also found that when learners feel a sense of belonging, they engage more, participate with enthusiasm, and are less likely to drop out.

Impact — The Community Keepers Story

Community Keepers was started in 2009 after its founders discovered that only one state social worker was allocated to every 32,000 learners in the South



African education system. Rather than expecting vulnerable young people to find their way to mental health services, Community Keepers brings the support directly to them.

What makes the organization unique is its partnership with schools, where full-time, on-site mental health facilities are established. The foundational principle is that psychosocial support is a precursor to academic support — the philosophy of “Maslow before Bloom,” meaning that only once basic needs

are met can students actively engage in learning. The Community Keepers suite of services follows the C.A.R.E. model:

C - Counseling: By opening counseling rooms inside schools, barriers to access are removed. Learners and educators have a consistent, reliable space and a trusted person to turn to — the foundation for a journey toward improved well-being.

A - Anchoring services: Prevention and early intervention take place through life skills and developmental workshops. These sessions give learners, guardians, and educators the chance to build their own toolbox of practical well-being techniques.

R - Referral pathways: When learners' needs go beyond counseling or skills development, they are connected to specialized services and relevant resources for further support.

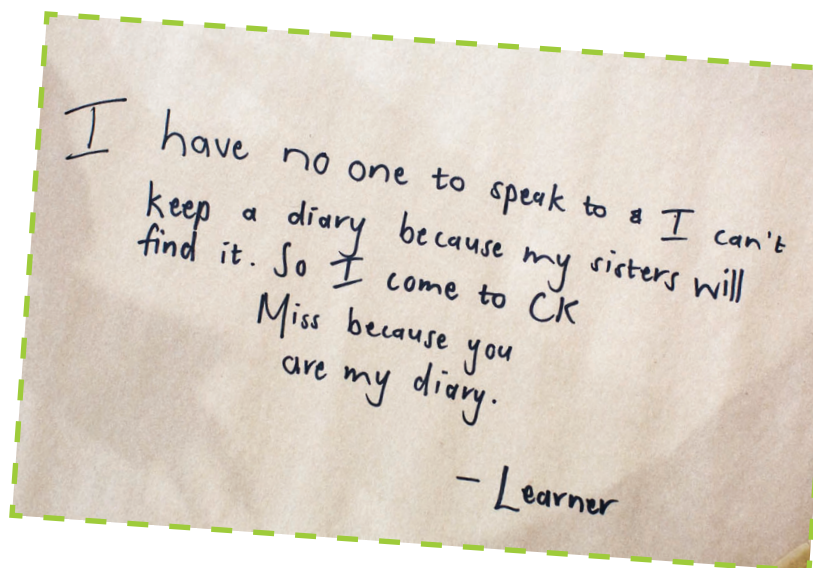
E - Environment of care: Learners, guardians, and educators receive layers of support through an advanced whole-school approach. By fostering a culture of well-being, schools become places where everyone feels they belong and can thrive.

Through C.A.R.E., the stigma around mental health challenges and asking for help is reduced. As a result, more learners reach out for help and their ability to manage emotions improves. Over time, this leads to greater resilience, stronger classroom engagement, better academic performance, and healthier family relationships. Absenteeism decreases and the risk of mental health-related dropout is reduced.

Community Keepers is now active in 89 schools across three regions in South Africa, including rural areas. The organization reaches 78,000 learners each year. In partner schools, the mental health professional-to-learner ratio has improved dramatically, from 1:32,000 to 1:990.

Post Pandemic

Because Community Keepers is based in schools, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown created an urgent need to pivot and offer telephonic support. Many



families in our communities share a single phone and lack private space for conversations. The team's approach was simple yet powerful: They called and asked, "How are you?" This non-threatening question opened the door to listening and connection. What began as a check-in became an unexpected opportunity for relationship building and destigmatization. Families commented that it was unusual to receive a "How are you" phone call — they usually only get called with bad news or when someone is causing trouble.

During and after the pandemic, the demand for support became unmanageable and extra hands were needed. Inspired by Professor Vikram Patel (Harvard University), who reminds us that "mental health is too important to leave to the professionals alone," and by Professor Crick Lund (WHO and UCT), who describes task-shifting as delegating as many tasks as possible so professionals can focus on their caseload, Community Keepers piloted an innovative Mental Health First Aid program.

Children and adolescents in schools need a safe space and a trusted person in whom to confide. At the same time, many school leavers in these communities face unemployment. This presented an opportunity to bring these two groups together, supported by psychologists, registered counselors, and social workers, to create a holistic, community-based mental health service.

First Responders

What do you picture when you hear "first aid" or "first responder"? Words like "immediate care," "stabilizing," or "risk assessment" might come to mind. First aid providers also educate in order to prevent crises. In the context of mental health, a first responder

is responsible for psychoeducation, emotional containment, safety-checking, prioritizing cases according to risk/urgency, and referring cases to professionals as necessary.

Community Keepers trains community members in Mental Health First Aid. These Care Facilitators work alongside a mental health professional, freeing the professionals to focus on their caseload. The professionals bring the science while Care Facilitators bring lived experience — a powerful combination.

As a professional social worker myself, this venture has challenged me to grapple with mental health needs and the mental health profession in a new way. This opportunity excites me — change and growth should feel a little daunting and stretching. At the heart of our work is acting in the best interests of our clients, and accessibility is the first step in living out that principle.

EQUIP

The EQUIP project, established by the World Health Organization, was designed to ensure quality care by non-specialist community mental health workers. Research identified the key skills these workers need, along with methods to train and assess them — all to ensure effective, high-quality mental health support. Community Keepers uses this platform to assess the core competencies of Care Facilitators, and to inform further training and development.

The 15 core competencies identified for quality care are:

- Non-verbal communication skills
- Verbal communication skills
- Explaining and promoting confidentiality
- Rapport building and self-disclosure
- Exploration and normalizing of feelings



- Demonstrating warmth, empathy, and genuineness
- Assessment of self-harm and developing a response plan
- Connecting to social functioning and impact on life
- Exploring learner's explanation of the problem
- Involvement of family and significant others
- Collaborative goal-setting
- Promoting realistic hope for change
- Incorporating coping mechanisms and prior solutions
- Psychoeducation with local terminology
- Elicitation of feedback.

Scaling and Sustainability

After testing the concept through a successful pilot, Community Keepers moved to test the project at scale. They partnered with the National Treasury's Jobs Fund in 2023 and 2024 to drive catalytic growth. From an initial 35 sites, another 44 were added across the country — all without compromising service quality. Two external groups engaged with stakeholders and confirmed the success of the expansion.

Since launching an internal Mental Health First Aid program, which includes training, mentoring, and support, it has become clear that these skills are needed far beyond schools. Community Keepers now offers external training that ranges from basic emotional literacy, which builds self-awareness, to more in-depth, hands-on courses that equip teams to apply these skills in supporting others.

While South Africa's education system is focused on the importance and value of literacy and numeracy, there is a gap in the importance of listening and socio-emotional literacy. Community Keeper's mission is to equip people with these life-changing skills. Participants in the training learn to destigmatize mental health and help-seeking, to truly listen, to use appropriate vocabulary, and to recognize when it is appropriate to call for additional help.

The Next Education Crisis

Educators themselves have emerged as a key at-risk group in need of this training. A 2024 study by Heleen Hofmeyr and colleagues on teacher preferences and job satisfaction in South Africa revealed that half of all teachers had considered leaving the profession due to stress from managing learners' psychosocial issues.³ It is clear that mental health support is needed not only for learners, but also for educators.

Because teacher and learner well-being are closely linked, and children quickly pick up on their teacher's

stress, supporting educator well-being is a pressing issue. Through topics such as classroom management, teacher motivation, and team building, Community Keepers is promoting teachers' coping skills, motivation, and sense of belonging. Rather than relying only on conventional professional development, the focus includes fun and play. Teachers are craving the opportunity to connect with their inner child.

Long-Term Vision

South Africa has a long history of generational trauma. Breaking this cycle is critical to the well-being of our communities. We believe justice means "doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do." Families and children deserve a lifeline. When they have access to a journey toward well-being, their life opportunities open up and the potential arises to change the trajectory of future generations.

This is taxing work, and Community Keepers recognizes the cost of caring, which is why the C.A.R.E. model does not end with the beneficiaries. Through their "caring for the carer" program, Community Keepers ensures that their mental health workers receive sufficient emotional support, supervision, and professional development.

Well-being can be defined as a person's ability to realize their potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community. Community Keepers' mission is to make this a reality for both their team and the communities they serve.

Here is the call to all of us: You don't need to have a qualification to care, to listen well, or to seek help when it is needed. Most important, every person, regardless of age, background, or circumstance, should have access to that help because "it is the right thing to do."

Notes:

¹Tomlinson, M., Kleintjes, S., & Lake, L. (Eds.). (2022). *South African child gauge 2021/2022: Child and adolescent mental health*. Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.

²Taylor, L., De Neve, J.-E., DeBorst, L., & Khanna, D. (2022). *Well-being in education in childhood and adolescence*. Wellbeing Research Centre (University of Oxford) & International Baccalaureate Organization.

³Hofmeyr, H., Pampallis, I., Qvist, J., & Swelindawo, L. (2024). *Teacher preferences and job satisfaction in South Africa*. Teacher Demographic Dividend Project, Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP), Stellenbosch University.

Disclosure Statement:

The author is an employee of Community Keepers.