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# Keeping the heart of community engagement beating in higher education: An interdisciplinary group work collaboration of social work and psychology academics

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## ARTICLE INFO

DOI:10.46223/HCMCOUJS.  
soci.en.15.6.3675.2025

Received: August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024

Revised: September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Accepted: September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024

*Keywords:*

community engagement;  
group work; interdisciplinary;  
psychology; social work

## ABSTRACT

This conceptual review explores the transformative potential of community engagement through group work in high schools, with social work and psychology academics playing a pivotal role as an interdisciplinary team. Community engagement, often underestimated, is a crucial aspect of academia that this paper seeks to underscore. By addressing the diverse challenges high school learners face, the review highlights the importance of collaboration among academics and key stakeholders such as health and education departments, the South African Police Service (SAPS), and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Employing a narrative review approach that involves the systematic search, selection, and synthesis of existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of a particular topic, we synthesise literature from 2015 to 2024, demonstrating the benefits of group work in tackling challenges in high schools. Key themes identified include socio-economic disparities, mental health issues, substance abuse, and violence. These insights and the researchers' expertise working with groups have culminated in developing practical guidelines. This paper provides guidelines for initiating group work, engaging stakeholders, and presenting existing successful interventions. Moreover, these guidelines empower social work and psychology academics as an interdisciplinary team to create supportive, collaborative school environments, ultimately contributing to better educational and social outcomes for high school learners.

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## 1. Introduction and background

Community engagement is recognised as the “third mission” of academia in higher education institutions (Bhagwan, 2017, p. 01). This third mission has unequivocally emerged as a critical component in the multifaceted role of social work and psychology academics. With their unique skill sets and understanding of community dynamics, these academics are well-positioned to facilitate and lead community engagement initiatives (Dube & Hendricks, 2023; Saidi & Boti, 2023). Traditionally, teaching and research have been viewed as the primary pillars of academia, but community engagement is increasingly acknowledged for its significant impact on educational outcomes and societal well-being (Bhagwan, 2017). This conceptual review

explores group work methods to foster community engagement within high schools, addressing the diverse challenges that high school learners face. By integrating the efforts of social work and psychology academics with stakeholders such as the Departments of Health (DoH) and Education (DoE), the South African Police Service (SAPS), and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), this collaborative initiative aims to create a comprehensive support system for learners in high schools.

High school learners undoubtedly face numerous challenges, including socioeconomic disparities, mental health issues, substance abuse, and violence, which adversely affect their educational and social outcomes (Boboyi, 2024a). Despite the critical role of community engagement in addressing these issues in collaboration with schools, observably, this third mission is often overlooked by academics in many higher education institutions, yet it has so many benefits. Social work and psychology academics, equipped to facilitate such engagement, often lack a structured approach to integrating community collaboration within high schools. Hence, developing guidelines would be instrumental in many areas of social work and psychology and a broader society of academics. Research has shown that collaborative community efforts can significantly mitigate these challenges (Maier et al., 2017; Noddings, 2015). For instance, Maier et al. (2017) highlight that community schools integrating various support services demonstrate improved learner outcomes regarding academic achievement and overall well-being.

The role of social work and psychology academics is pivotal in strengthening community engagement. Social work and psychology academics can initiate community engagements with schools through group work, particularly for those schools without school-based psycho-social support teams. They can effectively facilitate group work to engage high school learners by leveraging their expertise in group dynamics and community resources. Group work, as a method, has been extensively validated for its benefits in fostering peer support, enhancing communication skills, and building resilience among participants (Forsyth, 2021). The potential of group work to create a supportive community within schools is immense, as it encourages learners to share their experiences, seek support, and develop coping strategies in a safe environment.

Moreover, key stakeholders' involvement is crucial for such initiatives' success. The DoH can provide essential services such as mental health counseling and substance abuse programs (Bains & Diallo, 2016). The DoE can offer academic support and resources, while the SAPS can contribute to creating a safe school environment through awareness and intervention programmes (Makgoke & Mofokeng, 2020). NGOs, with their diverse expertise and resources, can offer additional support in areas like career guidance, life skills training, and extracurricular activities (Epstein et al., 2018).

Engaging these stakeholders in a coordinated effort can lead to the development of a robust learner support network. The benefits of the community school model, where partnerships between schools and community organisations lead to improved learner attendance, higher academic performance, and reduced behavioural problems (Epstein et al., 2018).

Community engagement through group work in high schools aligns with the broader goals of social work and psychology education, which include promoting social justice, enhancing human well-being, and addressing systemic inequalities (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2018; Hatcher et al., 2023). These academics thus have a unique opportunity to spearhead these initiatives, drawing on their facilitation, advocacy, and collaboration skills. By doing so, they

enhance the educational experience of high school learners and contribute to the broader goal of building more robust, resilient communities.

This gap necessitates a comprehensive framework that leverages group work methods to foster collaboration among key stakeholders, including the DoH and DoE, the SAPS, and the NGOs. This paper addresses this gap by developing practical guidelines for these academics to enhance learner well-being and resilience through effective community engagement and group work interventions.

### ***Aim and research questions***

This paper aims to develop practical guidelines for social work and psychology academics to conduct community engagement projects in high schools through group work methods. To achieve this aim, the following research questions guided the study:

- How can group work methods facilitated by social work and psychology academics enhance community engagement and address the challenges high school learners face?
- What are the best practices for engaging key stakeholders in collaborative group work initiatives within high schools to improve learner outcomes?

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The paper employs the systems theory pioneered by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (Becvar et al., 2023). Systems theory posits that individuals cannot be understood in isolation but must be viewed within their interactions with various systems, such as family, school, and community (Becvar et al., 2023; Teater, 2019). This theory emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of these systems, highlighting the importance of holistic perspectives in problem-solving.

This framework particularly applies to the paper's focus on using group work methods in high schools to enhance community engagement in higher education. By engaging key stakeholders like the DoH and DoE, the SAPS, and the NGOs, social work and psychology academics can create a comprehensive support network that mirrors the interconnected nature of these systems. Systems theory underscores the necessity of collaboration and coordination among different systems to effectively address challenges such as socioeconomic disparities, mental health issues, and violence faced by high school learners (Becvar et al., 2023). Systems theory is vital to this study as it provides a robust framework for understanding and addressing the multifaceted issues impacting learners through dynamic, adaptable, and comprehensive interventions.

## **3. Methodology**

This paper is rooted in the constructivist paradigm, highlighting the importance of comprehending and interpreting the intricacies of social interactions and individual experiences within the educational environment (Kamal, 2019; Omodan, 2024). Constructivism is particularly pertinent to the paper's emphasis on group work and community engagement, as it underscores the value of knowledge co-construction through collaborative processes and shared experiences.

A narrative review approach was employed, which allows for a comprehensive and interpretative synthesis of the existing literature (Boboyi, 2024b; Snyder, 2019). A narrative review is particularly suitable for exploring broad and complex topics, such as community

engagement through group work in high schools, as it enables a holistic examination of various perspectives, theories, and practices (Ferrari, 2015).

The literature search utilised several academic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as “community engagement,” “group work methods,” “high school challenges,” “social work and psychology academics,” “mental health in schools,” “school-based interventions,” and “stakeholder collaboration.” Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to refine the search results. The table below depicts the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the paper:

**Table 1**

*Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publications between 2015 and 2024</li> <li>• Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports</li> <li>• Studies relevant to high school settings</li> <li>• Research involving community engagement and groupwork methods</li> <li>• Articles discussing the role of social work and psychology academics</li> <li>• Researchers’ firsthand experience working with groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publications prior to 2015</li> <li>• Non-peer-reviewed articles and opinion pieces except for reports</li> <li>• Studies not relevant to high school settings</li> <li>• Literature not available in English</li> </ul>

*Source.* Authors

Although this narrative review does not involve direct research with human subjects, ethical considerations were maintained by accurately representing findings from the reviewed literature. Proper attribution to original authors and adherence to academic integrity standards were upheld throughout the review process. This ensures the reliability and credibility of the synthesis presented in this paper.

#### **4. Findings**

The literature analysis was conducted through a narrative synthesis approach, identifying key themes, patterns, and insights from the reviewed studies. This method facilitated a coherent integration of diverse perspectives, highlighting the interplay between community engagement, group work methods, and the challenges faced by high school learners. Through this approach, the paper was able to extract and synthesise valuable knowledge to inform the development of practical guidelines for social work and psychology academics. The following themes were formulated:

##### **Theme 1: Understanding community engagement in higher education**

Community engagement in higher education is increasingly recognised as an essential aspect of institutional missions to foster reciprocal partnerships that benefit both the academic institution and the wider community (Dube & Hendricks, 2023). The literature highlights that community engagement enhances learner learning, promotes civic responsibility, and addresses societal issues through collaborative efforts (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2016). Even though

community engagement is often confused with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), service-learning and community-based research offer learners experiential learning opportunities that improve their academic and professional skills while meeting community needs (Dube & Hendricks, 2023).

Despite the well-documented benefits of community engagement, significant challenges are also noted in the literature. A primary concern is a necessity for genuine reciprocity in partnerships between higher education institutions and community organisations. Often, these partnerships are skewed in favour of the academic institution's agenda, resulting in power and benefit imbalances (Stoecker, 2016). This lack of mutual benefit can compromise the sustainability and effectiveness of community engagement efforts (Stoecker, 2016).

The literature also underscores the need for institutional support and commitment to sustain community engagement initiatives. According to Hatcher et al. (2023), effective community engagement must be integrated into the institution's strategic plan, with dedicated resources and support from faculty and administration. However, many institutions struggle to achieve this integration due to competing priorities and limited resources (Dube & Hendricks, 2023).

Another critical aspect is the assessment and evaluation of community engagement efforts. Furco and Norvell (2019) stress the importance of developing robust assessment tools to measure the impact of community engagement on both learners and the community. However, the lack of standardised metrics and methodologies often complicates assessing these initiatives' true impact and effectiveness.

## **Theme 2: Enhancing learner well-being through group work**

Group work is recognised for creating supportive environments where learners can share experiences, build resilience, and develop coping strategies (First et al., 2018). Forsyth (2021) highlights that group work enhances peer support and communication skills, which are crucial for addressing adolescent mental health challenges. Group work sessions foster a sense of belonging and community, essential for learners navigating socio-economic and personal adversities.

While the benefits of group work are well-documented, some studies reveal potential limitations. For instance, group dynamics can sometimes lead to exclusion or reinforce negative behaviours if not properly managed (Brown & Pehrson, 2019). This underscores the importance of skilled facilitation by social work and psychology academics who can navigate and mitigate such challenges (Brown & Pehrson, 2019). Additionally, while group work promotes emotional and social support, its impact on academic performance can be variable. According to Johnson and Johnson (2021), the effectiveness of group work in improving academic outcomes depends significantly on the structure and objectives of the sessions. Structured group work with clear academic goals yields better academic results than unstructured sessions focused solely on social support.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that integrating group work within high school curricula requires careful consideration of contextual factors such as school culture, learner demographics, and available resources (Kurz et al., 2020). For example, schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas may face additional challenges in implementing group work effectively due to limited resources and higher incidences of learner trauma (Agasisti et al., 2021). Therefore, tailored approaches that consider these contextual factors are necessary for maximising the benefits of group work.

While the literature supports the efficacy of group work in enhancing learner well-being, it also highlights the need for skilled facilitation, structured approaches, and contextual adaptability. Social work and psychology academics must be equipped with the necessary skills and resources to implement group work effectively, ensuring that it contributes positively to high school learners' emotional and academic development.

### **Theme 3: Importance of stakeholder collaboration**

The literature on stakeholder collaboration in high school settings highlights its pivotal role in addressing learners' multifaceted challenges. Epstein et al. (2018) argue that partnerships between schools and community organisations enhance learner outcomes, such as higher academic performance and reduced behavioural issues. These collaborations provide a comprehensive support network catering to learner well-being, spanning mental health and academic support (Lewallen et al., 2015).

However, a critical literature analysis reveals that these collaborations' success depends on several factors. Effective communication and coordination among stakeholders are essential. Anderson-Butcher et al. (2018) point out that collaborative efforts can become fragmented and less practical without clear communication channels and defined roles. Furthermore, the sustainability of these partnerships often hinges on the commitment and engagement of all involved parties (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2018). Maintaining long-term collaboration requires a continuous investment of time and resources, which can be challenging (Maier et al., 2017).

Additionally, there is evidence that stakeholder collaboration can sometimes face resistance within the school system (Sulthani & Thoifah, 2022). Teachers and school administrators may be reluctant to engage with external organisations due to concerns about additional workload, lack of trust, or differing priorities. This highlights the importance of building strong, trust-based relationships and aligning the goals of all stakeholders (Sulthani & Thoifah, 2022).

Moreover, the literature indicates that the inclusivity and representativeness of stakeholder collaborations are crucial. Initiatives involving diverse stakeholders, including parents, local businesses, and community leaders, tend to be more successful in creating holistic support systems for learners (Epstein et al., 2018). However, ensuring equitable participation and addressing power dynamics within these collaborations can be challenging and requires deliberate effort.

While stakeholder collaboration holds significant promise for enhancing learner well-being and academic success, its effectiveness relies on clear communication, sustained commitment, and inclusive practices. Social work and psychology academics are crucial in facilitating these collaborations, requiring them to navigate institutional dynamics and foster strong and equitable partnerships.

### **Theme 4: The role of social work and psychology academics in facilitating group work**

Social work and psychology academics in high school settings are crucial in facilitating group work and fostering community engagement. This interdisciplinary team brings specialised knowledge in group dynamics, mental health, and community resources, positioning them uniquely to support high school learners effectively (Meyers et al., 2015). However, a critical literature review reveals several challenges and limitations associated with this role. One significant issue is the inadequate training and professional development for

social work and psychology academics specific to the high school context. While these academics are well-versed in general social work and psychology practices, many lack the specialised skills to address high school learners' unique challenges, such as academic stress and peer pressure (Phillippo et al., 2017; Webb, 2019). This gap highlights the need for targeted training programs that equip academics with the necessary competencies to work effectively in educational settings.

Additionally, the literature highlights the constraints imposed by school policies and administrative structures. Social work and psychology academics often face bureaucratic hurdles and limited autonomy in implementing innovative group work and community engagement strategies (Teasley, 2018). These constraints can stifle creativity and responsiveness, which are crucial for addressing the dynamic needs of high school learners. Furthermore, social work and psychology academics frequently encounter high caseloads and limited resources, which can impede their ability to provide individualised attention and support to learners in high schools (Teasley, 2018).

The literature also points to numerous successful interventions led by social work and psychology academics. For instance, group work initiatives focusing on peer support and mental health awareness have shown significant positive outcomes in learner resilience and well-being (Barry et al., 2017; Fenwick-Smith et al., 2018). These successes highlight the potential of social work and psychology academics to make a substantial impact when provided with adequate support and resources.

### **Theme 5: Best practices**

The pockets of evidence on the ground suggest that existing best practices provide valuable insights into group work and community engagement. One prominent example is the community schools model, which integrates various support services within the school environment (Maier et al., 2017). Community schools that partner with health services, social services, and community organisations significantly improve learner outcomes, including higher academic achievement and better mental health (Maier et al., 2017). This model exemplifies how multifaceted support systems can effectively address learners' diverse needs.

Another notable best practice is the implementation of peer support groups to address mental health issues. Gueldner et al. (2020) discuss how these groups create safe spaces for learners to share their experiences and support each other, reducing feelings of isolation and improving mental health outcomes. These peer-led initiatives underscore the importance of fostering learner agency and promoting peer-to-peer support as complementary to professional interventions (Gueldner et al., 2020).

Additionally, there are concerns regarding the inclusivity and equity of these interventions. Studies highlight that successful interventions must consider the diverse needs of all learner populations, including marginalised and underserved groups (Dari et al., 2021). Failure to do so can lead to disparities in outcomes and undermine the overall effectiveness of the programs.

## **5. Guidelines for social work and psychology academics in higher education**

Drawing from the work of Toseland and Rivas (2016), these guidelines aim to assist social work and psychology academics in implementing a groupwork process rooted in systems theory to foster community engagement and address the multifaceted challenges high school learners face. A thorough review informs these guidelines of the literature and the expertise of

researchers working with groups. Group work is a collaborative approach that brings together learners, educators, and community stakeholders to create a supportive environment where learners can share experiences, build resilience, and develop coping strategies (Oktari et al., 2015; Toseland & Rivas, 2016).

Utilising systems theory allows for a holistic perspective, recognising the interconnectedness of individual, family, school, and community systems and emphasising the need for comprehensive, multi-level interventions (Becvar et al., 2023; Teater, 2019). These guidelines outline practical steps for setting up and sustaining group work sessions, engaging key stakeholders, and evaluating the effectiveness of these interventions to ensure they are responsive to the dynamic needs of high school learners.

### **Needs assessment in high schools**

- The social work and psychology academics in higher education can conduct surveys, focus groups, and interviews with the schools to identify critical issues affecting learners.
- The data gathered can be used to determine the focus of group work sessions addressing, among other things, mental health, substance abuse, and bullying.
- Preparing and planning a group work proposal.
- It is essential to define clear objectives for the group work sessions so that schools know the type of engagement you want to initiate.
- Develop a structured proposal outlining everything you want to do and the outcomes you want to achieve. It is also essential to include the stakeholders you will involve and the role they will play.

### **Facilitation techniques**

- Use a strengths-based approach to empower learners and highlight their resilience and capabilities.
- Encourage active participation and peer support, fostering a sense of community and belonging.
- Incorporate interactive activities and discussions to engage learners and facilitate meaningful exchanges.
- Manage and address group dynamics that may emerge during group work sessions.

### **Implementation of group work sessions**

- After the school authorities accept the proposal, the social work and psychology academics can schedule regular group work sessions with learners. The duration of this group work depends on the academics and how they structure it.
- Since the schools have large numbers of learners, the academics can identify classes or grades they will work with and create a safe and inclusive environment for learners to share experiences and support each other.
- Topics can be unpacked and facilitated by the academics, allowing learners to engage as much as possible.

### **Evaluation of sessions by learners**

- After the completion of sessions, it is crucial to develop evaluation tools (surveys, feedback forms, observation checklists) to assess the effectiveness of group work sessions.
- The academics can collect and analyse data to identify areas for improvement.
- Adjust the group work plan based on feedback and outcomes.

### **Engagement of stakeholders in preparation for the awareness campaign**

One of the goals of group work sessions should be to raise awareness of issues affecting learners. As such, we believe that engaging the following stakeholders could be instrumental:

- Engage the Department of Education (DoE) office (provincial/district/circuit) to ascertain their role in the awareness campaign, as it may be part of their agenda to conduct such campaigns.
- Engage the Department of Health (DoH) to provide mental health awareness and substance abuse programs.
- Engage the South African Police Service (SAPS) to implement safety and awareness programmes, addressing violence and crime prevention issues.
- Engage local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) relevant to the topics discussed.

### **An awareness campaign**

- This can be the last step of community engagement. Social work and psychology academics can organise an awareness campaign inviting stakeholders to talk to learners about the issues discussed during group work sessions.
- This community engagement can be an interdisciplinary project where various disciplines collaborate to address issues encountered by learners in schools. We believe these steps through educational group work will keep the heart of community engagement beating in higher education.

## **6. Conclusion**

This conceptual review underscores the crucial role of community engagement through group work in addressing the multifaceted challenges high school learners face. By applying systems theory, social work, and psychology academics can create holistic and adaptive interventions that account for the interconnectedness of individual, familial, educational, and community factors. The guidelines offer a practical framework for initiating and sustaining group work sessions, engaging stakeholders, and evaluating interventions' effectiveness. Key findings include enhancing learner well-being through structured group work, promoting peer support, and fostering resilience. Effective stakeholder collaboration involving health services, educational departments, police services, and NGOs is essential for successful interventions. Social work and psychology academics are central in bridging the gap between learners and stakeholders despite challenges such as training needs, bureaucratic constraints, and ensuring inclusive practices. Successful interventions such as the community schools model and peer support groups offer best practices, highlighting the importance of continuous improvement, collaboration, and adaptability. Equipped with these guidelines, social work and psychology academics can significantly impact high school learners' well-being and academic success by fostering a supportive and interconnected environment.

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