

The value of using a storybook to protect the psychological health of children during COVID-19 in resource-limited communities in South Africa

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Abstract: Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused poor mental health, parental loss and food insecurity in children. At the pandemic's peak, context-relevant and child-friendly COVID-19 tools for child counselling and education were limited in low-income communities. Researchers and social work practitioners created the *Uhambo Lwami* storybook in isiZulu to initiate conversations with children about COVID-19. Using the Afrocentric framework, the authors present evidence from interviews with 13 purposively selected community-based social workers and child and youth workers who integrated the storybook into child counselling during the pandemic. The main theme discussed is the value of using the storybook to educate and support children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicated that the storybook could be helpful for grief and bereavement counselling and communicating COVID-19 information in a child-friendly way. The storybook further promoted child engagement and participation in sessions, strengthening the school's response to support children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper suggests that well-designed Afrocentric storybooks are a cost-effective communication tool to support counselling with children.

Keywords: Child friendly, storybook, child mental health, COVID-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased distress among children and exposed them to serious psychosocial and mental health challenges (Dubey et al., 2020; Imran et al., 2020; Albrecht et al., 2022). Like adults, children experienced uncertainty, fear, anxiety, depression and sleep disturbances resulting from the pandemic (Gee et al., 2021). Some families suffered multiple losses due to COVID-19, and children were left without parents and faced deep-seated unresolved bereavement. During the post-pandemic phase, children are likely to experience poor mental health as they struggle with the pandemic's long-term psychosocial and economic consequences (Meherali et al., 2021).

A myriad of factors influences the child's response during a crisis. The child's environment often determines the availability and access to resources to support them (Naicker et al., 2022). The availability of supportive social networks, including parents, extended family members and peers accessible to the child, influence the child's responses and coping during crisis (Van Breda and Theron, 2018). In South Africa, many families face overwhelming socio-economic hardships and stresses, which contribute to child-adult vulnerability during a pandemic (Naicker et al., 2022). Poverty-related circumstances increase risks to children, and many experience social exclusion, high levels of stress, food insecurity, inadequate resources and reduced social safety nets (World Health Organisation & UNICEF, 2020; Skeen et al., 2022). Before the pandemic, many families in South Africa were already facing economic hardships due to dire levels of unemployment (Raniga and Mthembu, 2017). The pandemic exacerbated income insecurity in families through parents either losing jobs, working reduced hours and erosion of family assets, resulting in increased family debts (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Despite being distal, a family's socio-economic context remains a significant factor in child mental health.

In South Africa, there have been reports of increased risks of child maltreatment and emotional abuse due to parents' stress, particularly in low-income households (Mahlangu et al., 2022). To reduce COVID-19 transmission, the South African government-imposed lockdown regulations whereby schools closed and children remained at home. During the lockdown, there were increased reports of food insecurity, exploitation, neglect and domestic violence in families (Cardenas et al., 2020).

Of grave concern was an increase of 61.6% in child abuse cases reported by a child-dedicated crisis line between 27 March to 30 April 2020 (Fouché et al., 2020; Petrowski et al., 2021). The highest category of calls from children were related to COVID-19 anxiety and general health concerns and cases of physical and sexual abuse were the second highest (Fouché et al., 2020). Access to age-appropriate and accurate information has been identified as essential to alleviate children's distress and to reduce fear and anxiety during a family crisis caused by COVID-19 or the death of a parent (Dalton et al., 2020; Meherali et al., 2021). In addition, access to

supportive psychosocial services and Afrocentric play therapy tools can be beneficial to assist children deal with trauma.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund conducted a survey with 7000 children, teachers, caregivers and parents from 104 countries to understand how COVID-19 impacted children in 2020 (Fore and Hijazi, 2020). The findings indicated that children experienced high levels of distress and in response, some organisations developed online tools and targeted psycho-social interventions to improve their mental health. In South Africa, as in many low- and middle-income communities online tools were not accessible to children due to limited, or no access to Wi-Fi and digital devices. This gap was identified at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 during discussions with social workers from the KwaZulu Natal Departments of Health, Social Development, and with local communities. The research partnership was formed with social workers to develop an Afrocentric tool a child could use regardless of access to Wi-Fi or a digital device. The storybook was developed as an innovative tool which used colorful illustrations, context-relevant storyline, and age-appropriate activities, written in isiZulu, the dominant local language, to help children aged between five to ten learn about COVID-19 and to help them process their anxieties in a safe space.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, families are strongly rooted in the tradition of oral storytelling. In Black South African families, stories called *izinganekwane*, also known as folklore, are traditionally used to teach morals, maintain cultural values and entertain children. Storytelling extends children's imagination. In other contexts, storytelling is part of the holistic practice and a resource for individual and community development (Froggett, 2004). In contemporary times, it has been incorporated in mental and public health care services. In South Africa for example, health care workers use *Kidz Alive* talk storybook to provide HIV, psychosocial and supportive services to children in order to improve their health and well-being outcomes (Mutambo et al., 2021). The storybook, a colorful cartoon-based tool, is used to deliver HIV care services to children including HIV counselling and testing, HIV disclosure, treatment adherence counselling and HIV patient literacy. The research findings indicate that *Kidz Alive* storybook promotes child active participation in their HIV care.

Similarly, in Namibia, a team of healthcare workers and counsellors have integrated a cartoon storybook titled *why I take my medication* to promote HIV disclosure in children (Brandt et al., 2015; Mutambo et al., 2021). The findings from these studies demonstrated that the storybook enhanced communication between the child, health care worker and primary caregiver and was appropriate for low-resourced communities (Brandt et al., 2015; Mutambo et al., 2021). Both books used child-friendly terminology and cartoon illustrations to improve HIV disclosure and promote adherence to antiretroviral treatment in children. Storybooks have become a valuable Afrocentric transformative intervention strategy that social workers can adopt to deliver health education, micro counselling and promote active

child participation in dealing with health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Storybooks are accessible to low-income communities as a targeted intervention and can be successfully distributed in schools which lack resources such as electricity.

In the same breath, recent literature indicates that indigenous play therapy tools and expressive art-based therapies have been used to improve the psychological well-being of children during the Ebola pandemic outbreak (Meherali et al., 2021). In therapeutic contexts, social workers successfully incorporate indigenous storybooks to complement play therapy with children. Mental health professionals tend to use metaphors which are regarded as the language of play and the child can deal with painful emotions symbolically using the story symbols, thereby distancing themselves from the painful themes. Carlson & Arthur (1999) argue that indigenous stories that form part of the therapeutic process, can resolve interpersonal problems, unresolved trauma and promote positive mental health in children when the books are written in their home language. In therapeutic contexts, the success of using the storybook can be determined by the child's connection with the story. For example, when the child asks for the story repeatedly or responds positively to the storybook (Glazer and Marcum, 2010). Despite the extensive use of storybooks in indigenous communities, it must be acknowledged that there was no available book written in local languages available to communicate about COVID-19 for children in South African communities. This intervention was an attempt to fulfil this empirical gap.

Overview of *Uhambo Lwami* storybook

Sewpaul et al. (2021, p.314) aptly argue that “there is a richness and value to African philosophical worldviews that, if abided by, would prevent the reproduction of customs and traditions that violate human rights”. *Uhambo Lwami Ngesikhathi seKhovithi* (My journey during COVID-19) storybook was developed and conceptualised by an Academic Exchange Services (DAAD) funded project team in 2020. This was an innovative intervention project in response to the needs expressed by social workers regarding the lack of Afrocentric child-friendly tools that were needed to educate children about COVID-19 to facilitate awareness and sharing of experiences with children. The storyline was conceptualised and developed through the active engagement of six social workers from non-governmental organisations operating in rural and township communities, and three final-year social work interns. The social workers participated in a three-day workshop which aimed to identify and describe children's psychosocial needs during the pandemic and develop a child-friendly tool to communicate with them. The storybook was informed by Piaget's cognitive development theory and Afrocentric scholarship to develop a context-appropriate storybook aligned with children's developmental stage.

The *Uhambo Lwami* story explores the journey of Nsimu, the book's main character, her family and their life experiences during the pandemic. Nsimu lives in rural areas of

KwaZulu-Natal with her two siblings and grandmother, a guardian, since the biological parents are deceased. Her uncle is a migrant worker in a big city. Nsimu shares about the hospitalisation of her grandmother due to the COVID-19 infection and her inability to visit her in hospital, schools closure and being isolated from friends. The uncle and the family pet, Skhukhu, are important sources of support for Nsimu and her siblings. Themes about illness, death and hope are explored in the storybook, sensitively using child-friendly terminology. The book includes various COVID-19 educational and colouring activities and is suitable for children aged 5-10 years. Activities related to dealing with the loss of a family member are included. The book has been shared with over 10 000 children in South African public schools and communities and has been translated into seven of the official languages in the country. A workshop was conducted to introduce the book and orientate social workers and child and youth care workers about multiple uses of the book. The guidelines were non-directive and workers could use the book according to their own interpretation. Due to its popularity, the book is now animated to allow children who cannot read to see the story.

Methodology

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Humanities and Social Science Research Committee in 2021, which permitted this qualitative study to be conducted. The study adopted an exploratory design which is grounded within the interpretivism paradigm. It was used to understand the participants' narratives as they shared their experiences of using the storybook with vulnerable children across communities in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Eleven of the participants were recruited from the organisations operating in rural communities, and two were from the townships, which were created as separate areas for Black African South Africans during the time of apartheid. In the post-apartheid era, rural and township communities are characterized by high unemployment, poverty and low household income (Phillip, 2014), and socioeconomic improvement is slow. Considering COVID-19 safety regulations and protocol, data were collected using individual telephonic in-depth interviews that lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. Due to poor connectivity networks, especially in rural areas, some interviews were conducted twice, each lasting an additional 30 –35 minutes.

Sampling Procedures

More than 10 000 copies of book were distributed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in schools. The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit 13 social workers and youth care workers from those NGO's which used the storybook

by intergrating it into existing school-based psycho-social programs offered to children. Although the book was distributed widely, the recruitment focused only on social service professionals who used the book in schools as reflected in Table 1. School-based social service support is not a norm in South African schools in fact, few schools offer this service consistently. The NGO's facilitated the recruitment process and referred the potential participants to the research team for further information about the study and to obtain informed consent. A key criterion for the purposive selection of the social and youth care workers was that they had to have used the storybook in their practice contexts with children. To maintain participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used.

Table 1
Biographical information

Participant	Gender	Profession	Age	Qualification	Organisation Type
Jan	Female	Social Work Intern	23	BSW	Non-governmental organisation
Dan	Female	Social Worker	25	BSW	Non-governmental organisation
Ben	Male	Social Worker	33	BSW	Non-governmental organisation
San	Male	Social Worker	24	BSW	Non-governmental organisation
Mel	Female	Social Worker		BSW	Non-governmental organisation
Thando	Female	Child & youth Care Workers	29	Matric & Certificate	Non-governmental organisation
Aphe	Male	Child & youth Care Workers	27	Matric & Certificate	Non-governmental organisation
Khona	Male	Child & youth Care Workers	42	Diploma	Non-governmental organisation
Nel	Male	Psychology Intern	26	BSS-Psychology	Non-governmental organisation
Kate	Female	Senior Child & Youth Care Worker	39	Diploma	Non-governmental organisation
Faith	Female	Social Worker	33	BSW	Non-governmental organisation
Zen	Female	Social Worker Intern	23	BSW	School
Phiwe	Female	Social Worker Intern	22	BSW	School

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to draw and analyse emerging themes from the data. The aim was to draw participants narratives about how they used the storybook with children during COVID-19 and its potential value to promoting children's psychological health. Secondly, we explored how they perceived the impact of the storybook. The interviews were conducted in isiZulu and were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. The data were thematically and critically analysed with reference to Afrocentric literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Clarke and Braun's (2013) five-step framework was used to guide the analysis. The first step comprised preliminary data exploration: the researchers transcribed the interviews based on the audio recordings. The second step entailed coding the data. The researchers referred to the transcribed interviews and then segmented and labelled the texts. The third step involved the use of codes to develop preliminary themes. Step four included connecting the interrelated themes and aligning them with common or different ones. Step five focused on synthesizing the findings into the key theme and subthemes which form the central premise of this article.

Findings

The value of using the Uhambo Lwami storybook to educate and support children during the COVID-19 pandemic

The storybook as a creative tool for grief and bereavement child counselling

Pre-COVID-19, almost a fifth of South African children had lost their parents and many experienced the loss of a family member (Meintjes et al., 2015). Globally, the pandemic exacerbated human loss and suffering in most families. In South Africa, 150 000 children are estimated to have lost their caregivers due to COVID-19 (World Health Organisation & UNICEF, 2022). It was not unexpected to identify young children with grief and bereavement experiences. In low-resourced families, adults in children's lives may focus more on urgent life stressors and daily basic survival needs (Villa and Demmer, 2005). Consequently, children's emotional needs may not be given due consideration.

Schools are an important community asset and a valuable space for teachers and other helping professionals to support children who have lost their parents or significant others. The participants facilitated small grief and bereavement support groups as a school-based intervention for children. In these groups, the participants used the storybook:

I facilitate a support group of children who have experienced loss in a school. Some of the parents or caregivers passed away due to COVID-19. We read the book in the group, and they reflect on the life of Nsimu and her loss at the early stage of the group. In the process, some find the courage to share a bit of information about their lives (Zen)

As evidenced through previous research, incorporating art and creative activities such as music, drawings, dancing, play, and storytelling are significant in facilitating grief work (Carlson Arthur, 1999; Dalton and Krout, 2005). Similarly, social workers working in resource-limited communities in South Africa integrate indigenous play techniques in child counselling (Mkhize and Mthembu, 2019; Mlotshwa and Mthembu, 2021). In the storybook, children can write a letter or draw as a form of self-expression about their loss and decide what to do with the letter or drawing. Some of the participants incorporated the storybook in anticipated grief and bereavement sessions:

It has helped a lot in preparing kids for a possible death of a loved one, but it has also helped kids identify some other family members within the community; when we do it, we have what we call a hand of safety where a child draws their hand and then on each finger, they have to identify at least five people that they can trust whenever there is something they need to talk to someone, or there is death in the family they can live with that person, so kids start now identifying their resources or other people within the family who are supportive in case something like that happens (Ben)

These findings further suggest that through storytelling, children may protect themselves by dealing with grief and related issues symbolically through the book's characters. When they feel safe, they can share their own individual stories. Some participants read the storybook in large classes to initiate discussions about possible grief and bereavement. Children with grief and bereavement experiences received individual psychosocial support:

The tool helped us a lot; you see, when we talk about bereavement in a classroom setting, for instance, even those that are touched by it brush it off with just saying, I am fine. For one that lost a family member, we had to understand if they were coping with the death of that one person (maybe a breadwinner) so that we could render psychosocial support (San)

Responding to how the storybook storyline impacted children, Khona, the participant below, reflected on the key lessons children learnt from Nsimu, the book's main character. Nsimu lost her grandmother, the primary caregiver, due to COVID-19, but the support from her family and friends helped her to cope with the loss:

In most families, after the funeral, children are not followed up. We don't follow up on children about how they feel like life moves on. The book is useful for allowing children to talk openly about how they feel. They also learn that other children like Nsimu go through similar experiences. For children, it showed them that most children go through the same

experience of grief, and someone else takes over. Even if you lose someone, there is someone else who comes and takes over (Faith)

It helped the children learn to deal with emotions, taught them how to deal with adversity, gave them hope and also taught them that life goes on no matter what situation one is facing (both parents died, the child was left orphaned), what is essential is that one accepts the help that is offered to them and move on (Khona).

Children related to Nsimu, and they understood her language. They could feel and understand her emotions and experiences, which were not too different from their own (Kate)

The indigenous storybook suitable for therapeutic contexts often offers fictional characters as models of positive and adaptive behaviour for children. Similarly, the storybook characters were perceived by the social workers and child and youth care workers as models to facilitate positive ways to process anxiety and fear experienced during the pandemic. Carlson and Arthur argues that children can apply what they have learnt from the storybook to their situations (1999).

The value of the storybook in sharing COVID-19 information

The person's knowledge and perceptions about COVID-19 and their understanding of their risks to the virus can have an impact on their health behaviours (Ringson and Raniga, 2022). Similarly to other pandemics like HIV infection, COVID-19 was associated with many myths and misconceptions. The findings from the South African study indicated mixed views regarding the authenticity of the pandemic (Kim et al., 2021; Silubonde et al., 2022). Others viewed COVID-19 as a white man's disease, others were in denial about its existence, and others felt that the virus was amplified and that the lockdown measures put in place to curb the virus transmission infringed on the rights of the citizens (Silubonde et al., 2022). Inevitably, children were exposed to these complex and mixed perceptions about COVID-19 in their families and local communities. Some of the views shared by one participant were:

COVID-19 brought confusion to children; at home, parents told them there was no COVID and at school, teachers told them there was COVID. The children followed COVID-19 protocols because they were forced to do so at school (Jan)

COVID-19-related child mortality rates were reportedly low; however, infected children can transmit the virus to adult household members (Silverberg et al., 2022). Therefore, communicating with children and exploring their understanding of COVID-19 and discussing possible ways to reduce transmission was key when schools re-opened:

We use the book to educate children because children are not immune to COVID-19, yet some thought they couldn't get infected with COVID. The book was used to correct that narrative (Thando)

The book teaches children about COVID-19 and about the protocols to follow to protect themselves from it (Phiwe)

Authentic and honest discussions with children about the pandemic were associated with uncertainty which provided space for adults to offer coherent explanations about what children observed and heard around them (Dalton et al., 2020). In addition, it provided a space for children to share their feelings. Using small and large groups, the participants used the storybook to initiate discussions about COVID-19. These findings reflect the relevance of providing age-appropriate information to children without overwhelming them. Well-developed indigenous child-friendly tools such as the *Uhambo Lwami* storybook assisted the social work practitioners, interns and child and youth care workers who worked with the children to have readily available tools to help them provide accurate information and dispel common myths and misconceptions about COVID-19. The participants expressed that the storybook served as a performance support tool (PST) or job aid which Florez-Arango et al. (2011:131) define as an “external device or artefact that provides just-in-time knowledge and information to help individuals with guidance by directing, guiding and enhancing performance.”

The value of the storybook to promote child participation and open communication

Previous South African research on storybooks indicates that well-designed storybooks can promote child participation. For example, the study conducted by Mutambo et al. (2021) demonstrated that the KidzAlive Talk Tool storybook facilitated the active participation of children in their health care. The use of colourful cartoon illustrations, stories in storybooks, simple language and terminology suitable for various developmental stages and versatility of the storybook were the reported mechanisms which appeared to address barriers to child participation in their health care (Mutambo et al., 2021). Similarly, this study’s findings indicated that the participants viewed *Uhambo Lwami* as helpful in promoting the engagement and participation of children in sessions:

It (the storybook) engages the children; sometimes you find a child that is closed up (does not want to talk) when you give them the book, and they can colour, for them that would be therapeutic as well because others love arts; having a book to read also knowing there is a part I will colour on my own, be creative and do my thing, so it helped them in that way to open up (Nel)

According to the participant below, the storybook facilitated open communication in cases where children find it difficult to share:

When I came with the book, it helped a lot because it drew the learners in; they started by just reading a story, and as they read further, they did not see that they had started talking about their own situation, so the book relaxes them (Zen)

Using different child-friendly activities and illustrations in the storybook can facilitate the active participation of children in sessions (Bradt et al., 2018). In this study, the storyline, and the varied playful yet educational activities appeared to have kept children engaged and participating actively in the group sessions.

Strengthening schools' responses for children impacted by COVID-19

Increasingly, schools are viewed as precious resources for delivering children's mental health and psychosocial support by social workers, lay counsellors, teachers and paraprofessionals (Huang, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2022). School social work is, unfortunately, not an integrated practice in most South African public schools. In some schools, social workers and lay counsellors offer school-based psychosocial and counselling services based on the extent of the psychosocial needs identified by non-governmental organisations or on a referral basis. The participants worked in primary schools located in rural or township communities where access to resources is often limited. During the pandemic, the valuable presence of these practitioners in schools to provide early intervention services for children affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, was important. The storybook complemented the psychosocial support interventions already in place, such as group work, individual counselling and class-based educational activities:

The challenge I faced as a social worker was the lack of child-friendly tools because sometimes, when we go into the classes, for instance, we do not usually come with any child-friendly tools that will intrigue the learners. We just come; in as much as they know we are social workers, it does not register in their minds that we are social workers because we come in with nothing in hand like the teachers, and we write on the chalkboard as teachers do. After getting 'Uhambo 'lwami' we were happy, and we used it as an assessment tool (San)

Similarly to the above narrative, most participants persistently lamented the absence of appropriate COVID-19 resources suitable for children and its impact on the delivery of school-based psychosocial services. The re-opening of schools under lockdown level 3 of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 facilitated access for social work practitioners and teachers to support children in coping with the devastating impact of COVID-19. At the height of the pandemic, mental health support was integrated into the 'school's routine through teacher training. The training content included helpful strategies to support children using the storybook. The initiative aimed to support teachers in creating a safe and supportive class environment where children recognise that their experiences during COVID-19 mattered and their teachers cared for their well-being. Supportive child-teacher relationships can protect mental health (Miller-Lewis et al., 2013). Moreover, teachers are instrumental in promoting school connectedness which refers to the extent to which learners feel accepted, valued and included in the school (Shochet et al., 2006; Skeen et al., 2022). By creating a

climate of warmth and acceptance in their classrooms, teachers, in part, contribute to learner connectedness in schools which is generally associated with positive self-esteem, internal regulation of emotions and reduced psychological distress in children (Shochet et al., 2006).

We gave the school teachers Uhambo lwami book and trained them on how to use it as an assessment tool for issues that needed a social worker. The part of the book where children had to write a letter to their loved ones helped bring out issues from those who did not open easily.... the part where you write a letter to someone you have lost, is where we picked up things (Jan).

We capacitated the teachers on how to use the storybook because they did not use it before; they would go into a class and ask for their homework and then punish those that did not do it without trying to find out how the child was doing and why they did not do the work. We have a problem of high suicide rates among our children in schools; we need to teach them to talk about their feelings, so we tried to educate the teachers about the right approach to dealing with children so that they can help us as social workers as well (San)

During the school-based group sessions, the impact of the loss was evident to some children. As a school-based social worker, the participant below used the storybook in class to initiate conversations about loss:

The children who had lost someone related to the storybook more.... children are still wounded; some cried when I read the storybook to them in class (3rd graders). They shared their experiences; one lost a grandmother, another a grandfather and the other a friend to COVID-19. Others shared that they got infected and hospitalized but came back okay; others shared that their parents fell sick but did not go to the hospital because they were afraid they'd be diagnosed with COVID-19, and they eventually healed. (Phiwe)

These findings illuminate various ways in which the child's social environment, such as schools, can support children in distress. Jackson argues that if school personnel are prepared to support children going through grief, children will understand grief as a normal and healthy response after loss. Despite experiencing trauma, not all children require a professional mental health intervention or a diagnosis (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Offering protective services to children by creating a safe space to share and validate feelings can promote children's mental health and well-being. Integrating the storybook into existing school-based psycho-social programs can strengthen its delivery and improve children's participation.

Discussion

The study findings suggest that the *Uhambo Lwami* storybook is an Afrocentric play tool that addresses the inclusion of children in COVID-19 communication. It engages children to express their views and experiences of living during COVID-19. Furthermore, as a play tool, the storybook was integrated into grief and bereavement counselling to help children talk about loss, a significant theme in the storybook. This is consistent with the literature on the benefits of using a storybooks with bereaved children (Glazer and Marcum, 2010). In sum, Afrocentric storytelling can be a powerful intervention strategy; telling one's story is part of children's mourning and healing process (Glazer and Marcum, 2010).

The empirical evidence from the study affirms that the book created a safe space for children to participate in sessions because they could identify with the key themes of the storybook, and children could share verbally and non-verbally through the storybook activities. The facilitating factors through which these goals were achieved included: using a storybook in a language spoken by the children, using a context-relevant storyline with relevant themes, simplifying the language and terminology to align it with the developmental stage of a child, including educational activities about COVID-19 and colourful illustrations to encourage a child's engagement. Acknowledging children's experiences during the pandemic and creating a safe space for children to express their fears, anxiety, and experiences is vital in protecting the psychological health of children (Dalton et al., 2020)

The storybook's central premise was to create an age-appropriate COVID-19 information tool that uses illustrations, activities and simplified terminology suitable for children and the use of a storyline that supports communicating sensitive experiences associated with COVID-19 with children. This is consistent with research which evidenced that effective age-appropriate communication with children alleviates distress during a crisis such as illness and a pandemic (Mutambo et al., 2021; Mlotshwa and Mthembu, 2021). Dalton et al. (2020), referring to communication with children about COVID-19, argue that children must be provided with age-appropriate materials in line with the child's comprehension of illness and causality. Furthermore, providing information and prioritising communication with children is a key response during a pandemic, and it can reduce anxiety (Imran et al., 2020). Access to accurate information about COVID-19 clarified misinformation and corrected stereotypes (Meherali et al., 2021).

Overall, research indicates that pandemics are precursors to mental health decline in children (Liang et al., 2020; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Schools are an essential community asset in delivering mental health support and implementing psychosocial school-based interventions by teachers, social workers and lay counsellors. Consistent with this study's findings, Lateefa et al. (2021) and Huang (2017) argue that schools are a resource to promote mental health and access to psychosocial services, and they must be supported in this role. In low-resourced communities, developing teachers' skills to support children's socio-emotional development and

foster early identification of socio-emotional challenges is critical for positive child well-being. The empirical evidence of this study affirms that the use of Afrocentric play tools such as the *Uhambo Lwami*, an indigenous storybook, served as a valuable resource for social workers and child and youth care workers working with children and providing support to children during a pandemic.

Conclusion

Storybooks can be a cost-effective tool for engaging, counselling, educating, and establishing rapport with a child in low-income communities because of their versatility and accessibility. This study has taught important lessons through COVID-19, which must be used to help the child deal with future pandemics. One lesson is that children experience multiple psychosocial issues, and pandemics in low-income communities further exacerbate the existing challenges. Schools are resources that can offer school-based psychosocial support. During pandemics, children's psychological health must be prioritised through early interventions that can be delivered in schools, and low-cost Afrocentric innovative tools such as storybooks can be successfully integrated into existing school-based psychosocial programs. However, more rigorous studies are recommended to understand the impact of the storybook in improving child mental health.

Limitations

Although the participants were recruited from various organisations and schools located in rural and township communities, our findings are not representative of all storybook users. Teachers, parents and children are excluded from this study, a limitation we acknowledge. The study primarily focused on social service professionals who used the storybook with children in schools and integrated it into school-based psycho-social support programs. This qualitative study builds on the existing literature about the value of storybooks within the context of the pandemic. It lays the foundation for future studies that will measure the impact of the storybook in therapeutic sessions and as a psycho-educational tool. Future research should include children and teachers as participants.

Declaration

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