




The Safety of Learners and Teachers in School: A Criminological Analysis

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Abstract: Recent study revealed that safety of learners and teachers continues to be a matter of major concern in the South African schools. Learners and teachers are no longer safe due to an increased level of violence in the schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify factors that mainly contribute to unsafe schools, challenges and measures that can be implemented to create safer environment in schools. This followed a qualitative approach and as such secondary data was collected from published newspapers and various reports. In this way, data was analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings discovered that bullying, vandalism, and learner's possession of dangerous weapons are the main factors that make the school environment unsafe. This study recommends that school search, age restriction or cut off and awareness campaigns, amongst other measures, should be implemented to create safe milieu in the schools.

Keywords: Learners, Safety, School, Teachers.

1. Introduction

South African schools are engulfed with horrendous acts of violence daily and that on its own makes the issue of school safety both topical and pivotal. The National Development Plan (NDP) Agenda Vision for 2030 is fundamentally explicit on the significance of safe school environments. It further gives emphasis on the fact that safety measures at school should strengthen and fortify learning outcomes and not generate a hub for both criminality and criminals. The National School Safety Framework (NSSF) guard against issues of safety, health and violence-free learning space. The framework also ensures the magnitude of school violence, shared-based approach and the prevention of violence. For the past five years, our schools have been under severe siege and as such the safety and security on the part of both learners and teachers was virtually not guaranteed. In other incidences some principals, teachers and learners were killed in school premises. Ndlovu (2023) pointed out that there were forty (40) stabbings, ten (10) shootings and sixteen violent crimes that ensued in the schools recently. Early last year, Shawn Mphela was stabbed outside the Geluksdal Secondary School by a group of boys, and prior to the incidence he was bullied at school by pupils (Seleka, 2023). Violence at public schools persists despite the government's declaration of the Regulations for 3 Safety Measures at all public schools. In terms of the declaration, no person may possess dangerous weapons or illegal drugs in the schools. The declaration further state that under no circumstances may a person enter the school premises while under the influence of alcohol.

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Nevertheless, violence at public schools continue to increase rapidly despite the measures and efforts that the Department of Basic Education has taken. In this regard, this study proposes to assess the safety of learners and teachers in schools within Thulamela Local Municipality Vhembe District.

1.1 Research Problem

Children spent about 80% of their lives at school as they attend from morning until noon and some until afternoon. Therefore, the learner's safety in schools is paramount as it will serve as a catalyst later in their lives (Mubita, 2021). There are many cases that have been reported that are related to gender-based violence in high schools. Adult boys who are still in high schools tend to take advantage of the young girls and ends up abusing them emotionally, physically and sexually. There are learners who uses drugs in school, such learners when they are under the influence of those substances, they become a threat to other leaners and the teachers or can lead to violence behaviour (Msibi, 2012). According to Van Jaarsveld (2008) gang fights, knife stabbings, drug trafficking and bullying in the school premises continues to be on the rise and as such presents a very serious challenge to the department of basic education.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to assess the safety of learners and teachers in school environment. This study focusses on the following three research objectives:

- To identify factors that contribute to unsafe schools.
- To identify measures that are taken by the school to ensure safety of learners and teachers.
- To explore the challenges encountered by the school in ensuring safety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Factors That Make the School Environment Unsafe

De Silva et al (2018) outlined that many individuals make the presumptions that the school is regarded as the safest place for learner's development and provides leaners with great opportunity to pursue their knowledge and to achieve personal growth. However, there is compelling evidence which shows that learners are not as safe as it is perceived in their respective school premises. Nearly 6% of the South African high school leaners are reported to have experienced victimisation during their day times at school.

2.1.1 Bullying

According to De Silva et al (2018), bullying tops the list among the factors that contributes to lack of safety in school environments. According to the National Association of School Nurses, they described bullying as the "dynamic and repetitive persistent patterns of verbal and nonverbal behaviours directed by one or more children on another child that are intended to deliberately inflict physical, verbal or emotional abuse in the presence of a real or perceived power differential". According to Selekman and Vessey (2004) bullying occurs when someone hits another person directly, or when someone shoves, trips, or taking someone's lunch money or homework. Direct bullying manifests itself in various forms such as damaging or taking ones belonging, taunting and mocking, teasing or verbal harassment or actions that are

embarrassing in nature like public humiliation. On the other hand, indirect bullying takes place when a person sends the other menacing or terrorizing e-mails, web pages, chat rooms, instant messaging. Ybarra and Mitchell (2007) acknowledge that the above definitions share the same emphasis on the persistence of behaviour and character as well as imbalance of power.

In the survey that was conducted by Glew et al (2005) it was a matter of concern that most elementary school learners feel unsafe during school hours. The survey further state that bullying impeded progressive teaching and learning among thousands Grade 5 learners in some urban in South Africa. Subsequently, the study concluded that bullying is the major reason for learners' sense of feeling unsafe coupled with nonattendance. In some instances, the study found that bullying had a negative effect on both the victims and the perpetrator. The pattern of bullying tends to continue or extend to the middle school with boys being at the centre as perpetrators. In this way, the study concluded that most boys who had some records of bullying were found to have more than one criminal conviction by the time they reach the age of 24 years.

2.1.2 Vandalism

Matsoga (2003) had it a right when she asserted that vandalism contributes immensely to the safety and security of learners in the learning milieu. Vandalism or hooliganism brings about distress on the part of learners as it results in the destruction of property. It thus leads to loss of stationery and other crucial items which are crux to the pedagogy in the schools. Learners and teachers also lose some personal belongings in the process. Male learners tend to shoulder the blame when it comes to vandalism and violence in the affected schools. Consequently, vandalism results in both nonattendance and absenteeism as it inculcates some element of fear among concerned learners (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013).

2.1.3 Carrying of Dangerous Weapons in The School Premises

The study by De Wet (2006) discovered that learners tend to carry or bring dangerous weapons when going to school and they end up harming and injuring their fellow classmates and teachers in the process. In this way, learners who end up as victims begins to feel unsafe and becomes discouraged from attending their classes effectively. The prevalence of dangerous weapons in our schools in gradually reducing our schools into a warzones instead of learning-zones. Both learners and teachers are entitled to a free learning environment and should always be protected from untoward behaviours by either outsiders or insiders. It's unfortunate that the policies and standards governing the protection of both learners and teachers seem to be on the verge of collapse. The situation cannot be allowed to unfold and deteriorate to that extent. Both outsiders and insiders cannot be allowed to have free access to attack and maim learners and teachers in our school premises.

2.2 Challenges Encountered in Ensuring Safety in Schools

There are various challenges that the school administrators face when ensuring the safety of the learners and teachers in the schools. According to Manning and Bucher (2013), ensuring school safety can be compromised by variety of factors such as lack of fence that surrounds the school buildings. There cannot be school safety if the school does not have a strong fence that will prevent the outsiders from entering the school premises. The lack of school fence hinders the safety of the school. Learners on such school can

easily go out and once they are out of the school premises their safety cannot be guaranteed by the school administrators. Maintenance of school facilities is crux when it comes to ensuring school safety. According to Manning and Bucher (2013), the school which has few school buildings or facilities to accommodate all the learners tend to have over-crowded classrooms which hinders the safety of the schools. Under normal circumstances, classrooms with high volumes of learners are uncontrollable and not manageable. There will be a lot of reported fights that occur during class time. And if such a classroom is not well maintained the health of such students cannot be guaranteed.

2.3 Measures to Be Implemented to Ensure Safety in The School Environment

According to Bucher and Manning (2017), it is advisable that before and after school, learners should be encouraged to at least have a routine in their respective communities that are parallel to school activities. This will help to instil some element of good conduct and behaviour on the part of the learners. This is in line with “charity begins at home” principle. In addition, the government should impose an obligation on sports organisations to work with schools and young people in general in order to: build moral and ethical standards of conduct; improve physical and mental health of learners by means of various forms of systematic engagement in physical exercises and sports; build a system of working with learners as spectators so as to prevent anti-social acts and acts of vandalism; assist the young learners to complete their studies at school; regulates the advantages of engaging in physical exercise and sports as an alternative to criminal activity. It is essential for school administrators to note that physical education, and sports carry out educational, healthcare, social, cultural and recreational functions.

Furthermore, School administrators need to vanguard and spearhead the effective implementation of the policies that are aimed at increasing safety and security in school premises. The following measures need to be adhered to as a way of ensuring safety in the school environment:

- Access control
- Physical security guards
- Alarms systems
- Surveillance cameras
- Electric fence

2.3.1 School Safety Intervention

Lack of maintenance of physical attributes may increase the likelihood of violence, for instance broken windows and doors, graffiti, dirty classrooms with dirty chairs, desks and tables signify delinquency, misbehaviour (Mangeya 2022). Lack of discipline on the part of both teachers and learners is a breeding ground for unsafety in our schools and as such the school management should always instil an element of some control measures at all material times in the schools. According to Masinga (2019) school intervention focuses on training teachers to understand the theory and scope of preventing crime and violence, and training their mental health to identify learners who are at risk and may require expert attention and referral. Equip them with the necessary knowledge on post-traumatic stress disorder, childhood trauma management, child development, ethics, basic communication skills and victim empowerment. Training learners on identifying the types of crime and violence noticed in the school and

to educate them about combating violence and crime at school. The school management should develop a school policy on drugs and alcohol; sexual relationships between learners and teachers; guns and weapons; and teenage sexuality (Castillo, Ijadi-Maghsoodi, Shadravan, Moore, Mensah, Docherty, & Wells, 2019).

3. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to assess the safety of learners and teachers at school in District of Vhembe. Qualitative research seeks to understand the social world and how the people's behaviours, perceptions, and experiences are. Secondary data collection was used to gather information for this study. Secondary data was collected from published articles and newspaper reports. Secondary data included reviewed material from published journal articles and newspaper articles that were published between 2021 to 2023. When selecting the secondary data, the researcher considered carefully when and where the data was collected. Hence, only articles and reports with cases of school base violence around Thulamela Local Municipality were selected. The data collected was analysed using thematic content analysis. The researcher followed Tesch's eight-step process for organising and analysing qualitative data. The researchers read an article over and over to try grasp the information that answers the research questions. Themes and sub-themes were created that derive from the research questions, only data that answer the questions was recorded, analysed, and interpreted. The ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained at the University of Venda and the researcher considered all the ethical consideration issues.

3.1. Limitation of This Study

The limitation of the study refers to the incapacities or the challenges faced by the researcher to carry out proper procedures to conduct this study. This study had methodological limitations, this study utilised secondary data collected from newspaper reports, therefore no empirical data was used for the analysis of the research findings. The data was collected between 2021 and 2023 may not reflect exactly what is happening in the area today and lastly, secondary data did not provide enough information on the topic especially in the area of the study which is Thulamela local municipality.

4. Result and Discussion

This section presents and discuss the results collected on published articles and newspaper reports. The data was analysed and divided into three themes and sub-themes acquired from the research objectives and questions. The themes are as follows:

- Theme 1: factors that contribute to unsafe schools
- Theme 2: measures that are taken by the school to ensure safety of learners and teachers
- Theme 3: challenges encountered by the school in ensuring safety

4.1 Theme 1: Factors That Contribute to Unsafe Schools

The findings in this study shows that bullying, sexual abuse and carrying of dangerous weapons are the factors that contribute to unsafe schools in the area Thulamela Local Municipality.

Bullying has always been an issue in rural schools that threatens the well-being of both learners and teachers. The findings also reflected on the bullying incident of Lufuno Mavhunga a pupil from Mbilwi Secondary School who was bullied and beaten by her classmate. The videos of Lufuno Mavhunga ended up going viral on social media which resulted in her committing suicide (Tshikalange, 2021).

In a separate incident occurred at John Marubini Primary School where a 17 years old pupil was bullying fellow pupils and teachers. The learner failed the grade at school and demanded to be progressed to grade 8. According to Mashudu (2021) further indicated that in another incident, a 50-year-old teacher from Mbilwi Secondary School where the bullying of Mavhunga occurred, allegedly raped a 17-year-old learner who at the time was in grade 12. Once more, a grade 10 learner from Ligege Secondary School stabbed a 38-year-old security guard officer, Mr Thivhileli Mashavha, while the officer was trying to assist the principal in maintaining order since the learner was causing havoc within the school premises. Nduvheni also stated that another incident occurred at Nthetsheseleni Secondary School near Sibasa where a learner was attacked and stabbed by a fellow learner on the way back from the restroom at the school precinct.

These findings have shown that schools in Thohoyandou have a high rate of safety risk factors that threaten both learners and teachers. Occurrences of bullying, sexual abuse and carrying of dangerous weapons as outlined by Tshikalange (2021), Mthiyane (2022), and Mashudu (2021) are like those of Sobuwa (2022) who found out that there is a levitation of violence all around South African schools. Sobuwa (2022) stated that three pupils were stabbed to death at school, one from General Smuts High School, Vereeniging, Gauteng, the second one from at Mayville Secondary School, KwaZulu-Natal and the last one from Qalabotjha Secondary School, Johannesburg. The results are evidence that violence is still a major challenge in South African schools and that the safety of learners and teachers in rural schools is threatened by these incidents.

4.2 Theme 2: Measures That Are Taken by The School to Ensure Safety of Learners and Teachers

Crime awareness programs has been identified as one of the the measures that are taken by the schools in ensuring safety of learners and teachers. According to Nduvheni (2022), the Thohoyandou South African Police Service (SAPS) members, Armaments Corporation of South Africa (ARMSCOR) officials, and Shandukani Youth Development members were invited to Tshandama Secondary School in Ngwenani ya Ha-Mapholi village to address the learners on risks factors of criminal activity and the consequences of being involved in such activities. The address was in the main focussed on the possession of illegal firearms and knives, drugs and alcohol and suggested that searches must be conducted in the schools in dealing with disruptive behaviour tendencies. The main aim was to address crime and identify learners coming from the disadvantaged backgrounds to assist in donation of uniforms, assisting them with their homework and assignments, provide them with funding opportunities such as bursaries for the ease of their study.

The Safety School Field Workers (SSFW) which maintain the School Safety Committee (SSC) and the School Governing Body (SGB) deals with addressing youth related challenges such as abuse, substance abuse, and gangsterism at large by establishing youth groups. The youth groups work hand in hand with the law enforcement, SCC and the SGB to identify hazards and reduce risk to maintain safety within the schools (Morris, 2018). This is a clear sign that schools in South Africa play a significant role in making

sure that safety of learners and teachers is a top priority. The school is trying to fight violence by enforcing necessary policies and regulations, and making sure that everyone including teachers adhere to them.

4.3 Theme 3: Challenges Encountered by The School in Ensuring Safety

According to Mohlabeng (2022) parents from Makhado Local Municipality chased a principal from the school alleging that the principal is failing to run and manage the school due to the high rate of violence that occurs at Nngweni Secondary School. For such an incident to take place, parents gathered when they heard the story that two pupils from the school were involved in a fight and it got out of hand and when they stabbed each other leading the other to be severely injury on the shoulder. The parents were concerned as to how does the incident took place inside the school premises where the principal was available but took no steps to prevent such. Incidents of incompetent staff members and management continue to be the order of the day in our education system.

Tshikalange (2021) stated that parents and members of the School Governing Body at Laerskool Theresapark in Gauteng accused the principal of failing to manage the school where she abused the educators at the school who later quit the job. Therefore, that led to her being chased out of the school, this incident is the same as the one that took place in Nngweni Secondary School. This is a major challenge in most of the provinces and it badly affects the reputation of governance and school policies throughout the country.

Therefore, the study recommends the following:

- School search - based on the findings that a learner stabbed another learner; this study recommends that police should occasionally visit the schools and search learners. This will discourage learner to bring unwanted dangerous weapons to school such as knives, sharp objects, and guns.
- Age restriction/cut off - the findings show that 17 years old caused havoc at school and demanded to be progressed to Grade 8. This study shows that most problematic learners are over age and therefore, if a learner reaches above 17 years and still in a lower grade, the learner should be referred to Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET)
- Reporting - the schools should create a way for learners to report incidents of miscount and ill-disciple anonymously. This is because most learners fear to report misconduct because they fear to be victimised.
- Learner Representative Council (LRC) – members should be trained to conduct patrols daily before school, during and after school to prevent misdemeanour, bullying and distribution of intolerable substances.
- School Governing Body (SGB) and teachers – Teachers and SGB should be given powers to dismiss learners with proven acts of association with gangsterism as they are not trained or equipped to deal with them.
- Crime awareness campaigns - police in social crime prevention need to conduct awareness campaigns at schools that are at high risks of criminality. Educating learners about bullying as most learners regard it as playing and make them aware of the consequences of committing crime at a young age and the consequences of bearing a criminal record.

- School safety plan- Schools should conduct safety audit and further create a school safety plan that address issues of concern to both learners and educators.

5. Conclusion

This study emphasises the safety of learners in school premises and outside the school premises as an issue which needs to be taken into consideration as it affects almost all the schools in the rural areas. The study revealed that the crimes that occurs in the school environment are in the main amongst learner to learner, and that they tend to victimise themselves as peers. They assault, abuse and bully each other in various forms. The findings also revealed that teacher to learner abuse as a factor that hinders safety in schools. The study shows that awareness campaign measures are very central in bringing stability in the schools to ensure safety of learners and teachers. This study concludes that the legislations and policies need to be put in place, implementation and reviewed to ensure the safety of school learners and teachers.

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