

Implementation of School Safety Policy in Primary and Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

The educational environment within schools serves as a conduit for achieving the educational goals and objectives of each country. Research conducted over a period suggests that effective teaching and learning can only occur in a safe and secure environment. Yet, even with existing laws, policies, regulations, and programs on school safety, teachers and learners face persistent threats to their safety both inside and outside the school grounds in Naboomspruit Circuit Schools. This study examined the implementation of school safety policies in primary and secondary schools within the Naboomspruit circuit in the Waterberg District in Limpopo Province. The study population consisted of principals, teachers, school governing body members, and learners from five (5) schools within Naboomspruit circuit. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, including two schools from quintiles 1 to 3 (representing poor communities), two schools from quintiles 4 to 5 (representing affluent communities), and one combined school covering grades 1 to 12. The study's key features encompassed evidence-based practices to address school safety challenges. Codes were employed to protect the identities of participants and schools involved in the study. The study's trustworthiness was assessed through criteria like credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The study findings revealed that schools partially implemented school safety policies, often without communicating them to learners and/or stakeholders. The study concluded by offering recommendations for addressing school safety challenges, grounded in contextual factors. The findings and recommendations are relevant to education managers, NGOs, parents and stakeholders who possess full or partial interest in the field of education or school safety. **KEYWORDS** School safety; quintile 1 to 5 schools; partial implementation; communication; stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

Schools in South Africa are increasingly becoming environments fostering violence, abuse and crime. Learners and educators experience a lack of safety and security within these institutions. Ngobeni (2013:5) asserts that school violence, including bullying and various forms of harassment; —sexual and racial are challenging behaviours that constantly disturb educators, learners, and school governing body leaders in both primary and secondary schools within Limpopo Province of South Africa. This study focused on one of the most challenging problems for school management and administrators in modern society: school safety. Preliminary literature, research design, methods and ethical considerations are briefly outlined Khumalo (2019:1).

Background

The concept of school safety has been defined by various authors within different contextual factors. Khumalo (2019) delineated that school violence encompasses physical violence, such as corporal punishment; psychological violence, including verbal abuse; sexual violence, such as rape and harassment; and bullying, including cyberbullying. Despite various definitions, Girmen et al. (2018:703) agree that lack of safety in schools constitutes a significant barrier to effective learning. For the scope of this study, school safety and school violence shall have the same meaning. In spite of existing policies, regulations, and programs related to school safety, schools in the Naboomspruit circuit in Waterberg Education District in the Limpopo Province have evolved into environments fostering violence, abuse, and crime. All stakeholders including learners, parents, and educators share a sense of insecurity and lack of safety within their respective schools. According to Ngobeni (2013:120), it is contended that all stakeholders recognise the substantial impact on teaching and learning when learners and educators experience insecurity during and after school hours. As a result, the study investigated the challenges in the implementation of school safety policies and assessed the impact of increased violent incidents on both teachers and learners. Khumalo (2018:8) postulates that school violence is negative, rendering an environment unsuitable for effective learning due to fear, intimidation, low self-esteem, and undermining. To ensure that we harvest first-hand experience, the study's participants included principals, teachers, learners and SGB members from schools within the Naboomspruit circuit. Ngobeni (2013) further contends that a healthy learning environment accommodates to learners' needs, characterised by a humane and caring environment that is devoid of violence and intimidation. Consequently, the study concluded by proposing strategies for tackling school safety challenges within Naboomspruit Circuit. These strategies are customised to suit the contextual factors applicable to schools within the same environment as Naboomspruit Circuit. With this approach, various countries have responded to school safety concerns differently based on the specific type and nature of incidents prevalent in each country.

In the US, as outlined by Brock et al. (2018:74), the government allocated resources (school-based police) to deal with incidents promptly as close as feasible to the point or occurrence of infringement.

This approach had both positive and negative outcomes. In their article, Brock, Kriger & Miro (2017:11), reported that even minor infringements were handled with extreme measures, yet there minimal enhancement in terms of school safety. Differing slightly from the US approach, Nigeria assigns police and soldiers to schools due to the types and magnitude of school safety incidents in Central Africa. Schools are at the centre of religious conflicts, and school safety issues encompass the abduction of young girls and mass killing of learners by military insurgents such as Boko Haram and ISIS. Thus, Nigerian government had to adopt extreme measures to ensure the safety of students and teachers (Oosthuizen 2013:155). In South Africa, police are not consistently stationed on school premises but are available for assistance when needed (Bogopa 2012:35). Burton and Leoschut (2012:54) emphasise the importance of shedding light on the contextual factors relevant to schools within Naboomspruit Circuit, which is the focus of this study.

Biographical information

Naboomspruit Circuit is located within Mookgophong municipality, situated in the Waterberg District in the Limpopo Province. Functioning as a midway point between Gauteng and Polokwane, the town is positioned along the N1 and R101 national roads, as well as the railway line. Population groups were separated by R101 road and the railway line, with white residents located on the western side and black residents on the eastern side. It was only after 1994 that some elite black individuals bought properties on the western side of the railway, while the majority of the less privileged population remained in the township and informal settlements.

Socio-economic conditions

Reportedly, around 2011, approximately eight farm schools had to close down due to extremely low enrolments, as farmers transitioned into game farming. Families were compelled to relocate to the township, leading to the emergence of informal settlements marked by extreme poverty and diminished moral values. Between 2018 and 2019, three serious incidents regarding child safety rattled society: society was shaken by three significant child safety incidents: First, three siblings aged between 2 and 12 years old died in a fire while asleep, purportedly as their parents visited a local tavern. Second, a 7th-grade student from a local primary school stabbed a 9th-grade student from a local secondary school to death at a local tavern. Third, two 12th-grade students lethally stabbed a classmate in broad daylight in plain view of society. In 2019, 12th-grade students were compelled to sit for their final NSC examinations under police supervision, owing to community turmoil triggered by the fatal stabbing of a young boy at a local tavern. As such students are drawn into grave crimes such as murder and gang-related activities. Disturbingly, young girls from primary schools are said to resort to prostitution as a means to access basic necessities. Escalating rates of teenage pregnancy and school dropouts further compound the issue, resulting in less than 30% completing matriculation and less than 8%

pursuing higher education, according to the 2011 census. Despite the contextual factors highlighted by Nelson Mandela in his renowned speech at Madison Park High School, as cited by Oxford reference.com, his assertion that 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world' remains accurate. However, effective learning cannot occur in an environment that lacks safety and security.

Recognizing that not all schools are inherently unsafe, the study directed its attention toward the fundamental factors contributing to the absence of school safety. The study concludes by offering strategies and recommendations specifically tailored to enhance the safety environment within schools of the Naboomspruit Circuit.

Problem statement

School safety stands as the foundation of curriculum delivery, rendering an environment where teaching and learning cannot transpire if both learners and teachers do not experience a sense of security (Ngobeni, 2013:113). The absence of safety within schools can arise from factors either within or outside the school premises.

Prior to 1994, educators and principals employed corporal punishment as a means of instilling discipline among learners. However, starting from 1995, Chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights and subsequent Constitutional Court rulings established that corporal punishment within schools was unconstitutional due to its infringement on the principles of human dignity (RSA, 1996). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996a) safeguards and promotes the essential rights of every individual. (RSA, 1996a).

As per the South African Schools Act No. 84 (RSA, 1996 b), the governing body, principal, and staff can be held legally liable in a case where a student under the care of the school is injured under circumstances where adequate measures were not taken to shield the student from violence, bullying, harassment, both sexual and racial, and injury.

Under the Employment of Educators Act No. 76 (RSA, 1998) and Education Laws Amendment Act No.53 (RSA, 2000), an educator will be guilty of misconduct when, among others, he/she endangers the lives of him/herself or others by failing to comply with set safety rules or regulations during the course of duty. Students within the age group of 12-18 in the Primary and Secondary schools are classified as adolescents, undergoing a multitude of physical and emotional changes. These changes commonly result in deviant and undesirable behaviours among adolescents and teenagers. The pressures and challenges inherent to adolescence often manifest as disruptive and uncontrollable behaviour.

Children at schools consistently confront the distressing reality of potential sexual abuse and harassment from community members, educators, and other fellow students. There is a high incidence of rape, often occurring in toilets, empty classrooms, hallways, in nearby bushes and hostels. Citing a report from e-tv's program '3rd Degree' in July 2019, it is alarming that 5000 children are incarcerated for having committed violent offenses. Over the last five years, there has been a noticeable surge in reported school safety incidents encompassing interactions between learners, as well as between students and teachers, and even involving

teachers towards students. A distressing number of learners found themselves in police custody, while tragically, some lost their lives. The most widespread incidents are student-to-student incidents, encompassing bullying, common assault, common assault causing grievous bodily harm, murder, and gang-related assault involving possession of dangerous weapons, alcohol, and substance abuse. Teachers report that periods that come after breaks are negatively affected by shifts student attitude, potentially linked to substance abuse during break. While a significant number of incidents often go unreported, occurrences of student-to-teacher and teacher-to-student incidents involve threats of harm, verbal and emotional abuse, physical abuse and prejudice. Most recently, there has been a noticeable up in cases involving murder of students, either individually or as a part of a gang. Despite the existence of policies, regulations and programs aimed at enhancing school safety, educational institutions persistently encounter these incidents. These initiatives encompass the National Schools Safety Framework (NSSF), the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJPC) program establishing connections between schools and police stations, as well as training for principals, SGB, and school safety officers.

Research Questions

The motivating questions driving the researcher's inquiry and requiring attention are categorised as follows:

- What is the extent or magnitude of school safety incidents (types) within Naboomspruit Circuits in Waterberg District (Limpopo Province)?
- What challenges are encountered by teachers and students concerning school safety in the Naboomspruit circuit within the Waterberg Education District?
- What factors contribute to either the safety or lack of safety in primary and secondary schools within the Naboomspruit circuit in Waterberg Education District (Limpopo Province)?
- What strategies can schools develop to enhance safety within Naboomspruit circuit effectively?

Study objectives

The objectives to be achieved through this study are outlined as follows:

- To examine the scope of safety incidents in primary and secondary schools within Naboomspruit Circuit.
- To examine the extent to which teachers and students encounter incidents related to school safety within Naboomspruit circuit.
- To examine the reasons underlying an unsafe school environment and effectiveness of the current protocols implemented by schools in the Naboomspruit circuit.
- To develop guidelines to assist schools in enhancing safety within primary and secondary schools in Naboomspruit circuit, as well as in similar regions.

Significance of the study

Although South Africa possesses existing legislation, regulations, and programs addressing school safety incidents within Naboomspruit circuit. Consequently, this study seeks to investigate these incidents and establish pragmatic solutions to address them effectively.

The researcher gathered information regarding school safety through an extensive document analysis, employing questionnaire and conducting interviews. The interviews involved diverse stakeholders within Naboomspruit circuit, facilitating the collection of insights into school safety. Additionally, the researcher amassed data pertaining to distinctive challenges and concerns specific to the Naboomspruit circuit situated within the Waterberg Education District of the Limpopo province.

The underlying factors contributing to the violent behaviour of students within primary and secondary schools in Naboomspruit circuit were identified. Employing Bhatia's data validation methods (Bhatia, 2018), for data analysis and interpretation, the researcher subsequently formulated guidelines to enhance school safety. These guidelines will assist educators, students, and parents in tackling school safety concerns, thus fostering a secure school environment conducive to effective learning and teaching. The researcher's developed guidelines aspire to furnish practical resolutions to the challenges related to school safety.

THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theory shaping this study, amongst others, the ecological theory. As highlighted by Benbenisty, (2008:65) and referenced in Motlatsi (2018:8), the ecological approach examines how external context in which the school are embedded interact with internal school and student characteristics to influence levels of victimisation in schools.

The layered and nested contexts include schools' structural characteristics, social climate and anti-violence policies, along with the neighbourhood on poverty, social organisation and crime. Burton and Leoschut (2013:54) maintain that safety in schools is a microcosm of safety in the society; in the surrounding streets, community and neighbourhood, in the home, in other social institutions and beyond.

This was confirmed by a study conducted by de Wet in the Western Cape flats as reported by The Cape Times. The study showed that learners encounter diverse forms of violence both within and outside school premises (de Wet, 2016: 5).

Khumalo (2018:1) maintains that the escalation of violence in South African schools has drawn the attention of not only the government but also international organisations such as UNESCO, which collaborates with countries like South Africa (Unesco, 2013). Within this context, it becomes imperative to analyse each country, delving into the legislations and policies crafted to protect the rights of learners and teachers, informed by unique contextual factors relevant to the respective nation.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Even though a research design is a master plan providing clear guidance on the study's execution, various authors adopt different contexts. In this study, the phenomenological design was adopted to comprehend the participants' lived experiences. McMillan and Schumacher (2014:372) explain that a phenomenological design describes and interprets participants' experiences regarding an event to understand the meanings they ascribe to that event. Participants in this study were interviewed within their natural environment.

Research paradigm

Even with the facts, Dean (2018:3) suggests that interpretivism has encountered criticism. Dean (2018:3) maintains that questions over the quality of the mixed methods approach to gathering data arise because a lack of universal evaluative criteria in judging its merits is certain. Dean (2018:3) further aligns with this viewpoint and highlights that the absence of a concrete hypothesis before fieldwork, the limited size of specific small 'n' studies, and the limitations on generalizability and objectivity are the disadvantages of interpretive research.

Interpretivism is used as the paradigm in this study. Interpretivists, over time, have developed trustworthy and quality research practices countering these arguments (Dean, 2018:3). Therefore, the researcher deemed this paradigm most fitting for this study because it facilitated the exploration of participants' viewpoints and the interpretation of their experiences, roles, and outlooks regarding school safety policy implementation. The findings contributed to reconstructing the intended meaning of the text and achieving a singular accurate interpretation of how safety policies are implemented in schools in the Naboomspruit circuit of the Waterberg Education District in the Limpopo province.

Research Methods

The research method used in this study is qualitative. Denzin and Lincoln (2011:3), as cited in Cresswell (2013:44), 'assert that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings by attempting to make sense of or interpreting phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them'. Participants were interviewed in their natural environment without manipulating any variables.

The primary research tools employed in this study encompass document analysis and interviews. However, specific questions in the questionnaire are open-ended, which assisted the researcher in gathering the respondents' views and opinions on certain aspects of school safety (De Vos, 2011:347). Therefore, a qualitative approach has been employed. Table 1.1 summarises the research approach implemented.



In this study, the researcher investigated school safety in the primary and secondary schools in the Naboomspruit Circuit in Limpopo, South Africa, using interviews, tape recorder, note taking and document analysis to collect data. Participants were categorised as follows:-

- Five (5) schools in Naboomspruit Circuit, two (2) Primary schools (one from Quintile 1 to 3 and one from quintile 4 & 5), two (2) Secondary schools (one from Quintile 1 to 3 and one from quintile 4 & 5), and one (1) combined school.

- Twenty (20) participants comprising four (4) participants from each of the five (5) schools: The SGB chairperson, the Principal, the Life Orientation educator (or teacher responsible for safety) and the RCL President or one Grade 7 class leader (primary schools) from each selected school were interviewed.

Table 1.

Research Approach

METHODOLOGY	
Research Approach Qualitative	Research Paradigm Interpretive
	
RESEARCH DESIGN Case Study	
Sampling and sampling technique Purposive: 5 Schools in Naboomspruit Circuit	Data collection Document analysis, Questionnaire, and Interviews
	
DATA ANALYSIS Interpretive and Content Analysis	
Data Trustworthiness Credibility, Transferability, Reliability & Confirmability	Ethical Considerations Access & Acceptance, Voluntary Participation Confidentiality/ Anonymity & Right to withdraw from participation

External stakeholders included a police officer from the local South African Police station, social workers and/or Department of Justice officials dealing with juvenile delinquents. Data on safety incidents involving school-aged children were retrieved from the above-mentioned institutions to corroborate information gathered from internal participants. Voice recordings captured in-depth information on participants’ perceptions of school safety.

Responses were transcribed during the interview and subsequently polished using the voice recorder. Documents were analysed to enhance the breadth and scope of the study. These documents included School Safety Policies, Learner Codes of Conduct, school safety incident records, disciplinary record books, and the minute book for school safety and/or disciplinary committee.

Local statistics on safety incidents involving learners were retrieved from the local SAPS, Department of Justice, and/or Social workers' records. These statistics were employed by respecting privacy rights and using aggregated data without infringing upon individual privacy.

Population and sampling

Population

De Vos (2011:223) maintains that the concept of population delineates the parameters of the study units and relates to individuals within the universe exhibiting specific characteristics. Conversely, Babbie and Mouton (2006:100) define the population of a study as the group or people from whom we want to draw a conclusion.

Against this background, population encompasses all the people in a given area who have been interviewed to gather information regarding the subject of investigation. However, due to time and monetary constraints, the whole population was not included, and therefore a representative sample was drawn from the population (De Vos, 2011:223). The population for this research comprised 14 schools: 8 primary schools, four secondary schools, and two combined schools in the Naboomspruit circuit of Waterberg Education District in the Limpopo province.

Sampling

Macmillan and Schumacher (2014:6) suggest that sampling involves selecting a part of the population by a researcher. Maree (2010:178), in Bogopa (2014:39), posits that sampling is particularly used when the research is conducted purposively.

Maree (2010:178) further maintains that sampling comprises probability and non-probability sampling methods, with probability sampling covering simple random sampling, systematic sampling, stratified sampling, and cluster sampling. Maree (2013) in Ngidi (2018:51) argues that non-probability sampling encompasses convenience sampling, quota sampling, purposive sampling and snowball sampling.

The researcher chose purposive sampling in this study, aligning with the research's focus. De Vos et al. (2011:392) posit that in purposive sampling, participants are chosen due to their expertise in the related field.

This study's population comprised 15 schools. The researcher used purposive sampling to select 20 participants. Participants included 5 SGB chairpersons, 5 Principals, 5 Life Orientation educators (or Educators responsible for safety), and the 5 RCL chairpersons/grade 7 class captain (primary school) from each sampled school.

The respondents comprised three male and two female SGB chairpersons aged between 30 and 55; three male and two female principals; three female and two male educators aged between 30 and 60; and all learners aged between 13 and 18. All interviews were conducted in their natural school environment.

Data collection

Data collection encompasses various instruments the researcher uses to collect data. In this study, the researcher employed several methods to collect the information or data and utilised

document analysis to analyse school safety policies, incident registers and policy documents related to school safety. Additionally, formal semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted to collect data.

Wagner et al. (2012:133) accentuate that an interview is a data collection tool designed to gather detailed descriptive data, assisting the researcher in perceiving the world through the participants' perspectives.

This situation implies that even though the researcher formulated many questions, the emphasis was enabling the participants to express themselves openly on subjects of interest. Data were gathered qualitatively via interview questionnaires on implementing school safety policies within primary and secondary schools in the Naboomspruit circuit of Waterberg Education District in the Limpopo province.

Data analysis

Maree (2011:99) poses that data analysis is usually based on an interpretative philosophy targeted to examine the qualitative data's meaningful and symbolic content. Data analysis addresses how participants derive meaning from a specific phenomenon by analysing their perceptions, attitudes, understanding, knowledge, values, feelings, and experiences to approximate their construction.

Wagner (2012: 229) posits that data analysis involves organising and interrogating data to enable researchers to discern patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, offer interpretations, post accounts, or generate themes. Therefore, Walliman (2011:132) agrees that data include unprocessed material researchers collect from the world they are studying; thus, the data include particulars forming the basis of analysis.

Data encompass materials researchers actively document, such as interview transcripts and participant observation field notes. As Bhatia (2018) states, content analysis is used to analyse documented information including text, media, or physical items. Content analysis is usually used to analyse responses from interviewees.

In this study, after data were collected, they were transcribed in a descriptive and prescriptive form to capture the participant's perceptions on implementing school policies. Common themes were categorised and interpreted scientifically to control subjectivity and ensure conformity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The key findings relate to the literature review and empirical study results. They focus on the following:

Record-keeping and reporting systems

Literature depicts that record keeping and reporting are major concerns in various studies. Some incidents are considered so minor that they are not recorded. However, the frequency and prevalence of minor incidents can mirror major ones if unaddressed. This study identified record-keeping and incident analysis as key issues to address.

Schools lacked updated safety policies and incident registers. Minutes for disciplinary case meetings were poorly documented, impacting accurate reporting across all studied schools. Three of the five SGB participants reported that the school safety policy was never discussed with parents and learners. The risk is the irregular implementation of the safety policies or learner codes of conduct.

The prevalence and magnitude of safety incidents in schools

Literature review reveals that despite international, African or local school safety policies and programmes, schools still experience substantial safety challenges.

Even though countries vary in the type and scale of safety incidents, teachers and learners are often the primary victims. Incidents include teasing, bullying, fights, bringing weapons to school, drug and verbal abuse and more severe incidents such as mass shootings and insurgent invasions.

The study revealed that schools lacked updated incident registers. Only serious incidents were recorded and reported to the SGB, while 'minor' incidents were left for class teachers to resolve without recording. This under-reporting hinders effective safety planning in schools. Stakeholders and role players are unaware of the prevalence and magnitude of school safety incidents.

Effects of safety incidents on learners and teachers

International and local literature reveal that all forms of violence in schools infringe on the fundamental right to education, and an unsafe learning environment diminishes the quality of teaching and learning. Both teachers and learners emerge as the primary victims of school safety incidents.

The teachers feel responsible for protecting the learners from impending danger, often becoming sacrificial lambs to both the perpetrators and authorities due to 'in loco parentis'. Teaching time is also lost while addressing incidents from both within the school, like "learner to learner" and "teacher to learner" or "learner to teacher" conflicts and from external issues such as community uprisings or criminals targeting schools.

While principals reported improved safety measures, both teachers and learners felt unsafe on school premises. One learner claimed that reporting incidents made no difference because the principals and teachers did not act to improve the situation. Lack of safety adversely affects teaching and learning.

Policies and Programmes implemented by schools to address safety challenges

Various countries and organisations have developed legislation, policies and programmes for schools to implement to address safety challenges. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) guarantees the safety of the learners/ children.

Learners have the right to be protected from all forms of danger. Sanusi (2018:6) posits that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (UDHR) is the foundation of international human rights law.

Signatory member countries are bound by the declarations to develop programmes and legislations to protect children from danger irrespective of their nationality or status. To this end, schools are mandated to formulate policies for child protection.

Our study revealed that schools do have policies. However, such policies are usually developed by principals and never discussed with teachers, learners, and parents. Therefore, learners can only learn transgression during disciplinary hearing meetings. This circumstance poses a risk to the regular implementation of policies.

Effectiveness of Current Policies and Programmes to address school safety challenges

Literature has revealed that despite the US enacting several legislations, allocating budgets, and providing resources over the years, school safety still remains one of the most fundamental challenges in schooling. Learners and teachers are still exposed to various forms of violence. Similarly, schools in African states such as Nigeria and South Africa still face perpetual challenges to school safety.

Our study has confirmed that such challenges equally affect older and younger learners. A pressing need to further engage and develop policies and programmes relevant to the contextual factors is evident in every school community.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Themes 1, 2, 3, and 4 summarise our study's main findings. Sub-themes were developed to probe participant's responses. The findings follow:

Theme 1: Magnitude of Safety Incidents: Recording and Reporting

Document analysis, including school policies and incident registers, depicted that schools lacked proper record-keeping or filing procedures. No school provided a five-year statistical analysis of safety incidents. Even though schools have safety policies and committees and hold disciplinary hearing meetings, these records are not properly kept and analysed.

Where records are available, only major incidents leading to SGB hearings meetings are documented. Minor incidents are relegated to class teachers and are not centrally recorded. This condition may pose a risk because schools and communities might overlook trends and the prevalence of particular safety challenges.

Even though these issues may seem isolated, they may cause the authorities to miss the opportunity to develop relevant interventions timeously. Therefore, the Departmental interventions on using the South African Schools Administration and Management System (SASAMS) to capture safety incidents from 2020 may yield positive results if such incidents are centrally reported and recorded.

This study further revealed that the current School Safety Policies were adopted years ago except for school (05), whose policies were adopted by the current SGB in 2021. One School Safety Officer (SSO03) mentioned that their policy was adopted nine (9) years ago. Parents and learners reportedly were not involved or informed during these policies' formulation.

To sum up, these policies were either bought or developed by individuals (like the Principal or School Safety Officer) only to comply with Departmental directives. The risk is that

learners typically discover policy breaches through observation or after violating them. Therefore, the implementation can be biased and discriminatory based on the perpetrator or victim.

Theme 2: The Prevalence and Magnitude of Safety Incidents

The study revealed that schools face safety challenges, confirming the findings in theme 1 on document analysis. Nevertheless, participants could not provide statistical analysis from 2015 to 2020. Safety incidents varied from minor infractions such as teasing, stealing a pen, and swearing to major incidents, including drug usage and peddling on the school premises, alcohol abuse, fights, and possession of knives.

Dagga or Marijuana was frequently reported as the most prevalent issue in secondary schools. The Principal (PR01) reported a case of a grade 2 learner who brought a knife to school for self-defence. Moreover, Principal (PR05) reported cases of grade six (6) learners who were gang members jumping over fences and dropping out of school during impromptu search and seizure procedures.

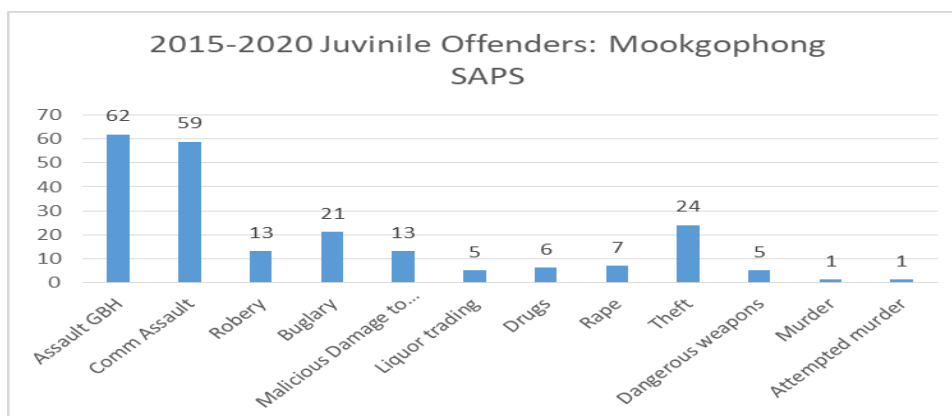
SSO02 confirmed PR02's account of the alcohol abuse by learners, especially after breaks. While fights were frequent across all schools, no cases were reported of using sharp objects among learners despite numerous confiscations of knives and pairs of scissors. Additionally, SG01 reported challenges with learner transport and visible poverty among learners. School 01, categorised as a quintile 5 school serving affluent communities, does not qualify for the Departmental nutrition programme. This situation hurts learners from low income families, making them destitute and vulnerable.

The identified risks stem from the high rate of unaddressed safety incidents at the school level, negatively affecting teaching and learning. This condition was evident when learners indicated that reporting incidents yielded no positive results, causing overall apathy among learners. Hence, Lnr04 noted that learners resort to handling matters independently.

The study's findings were confirmed by statistics provided by the Mookgophong SAPS (Table 2).

Table 2.

2015 – 2020 Juvenile offenders: Mookgophong (Naboomspruit) SAPS



Most cases involving juvenile offenders were related to common assault, assault with the intent to cause grievous bodily harm, theft and malicious property damage. The prevalence of fighting and bullying incidents in schools, as reported by the participants, confirmed this occurrence.

The principle that a school is a microcosm of the local community is well-justified. Moreover, participants reported that some fighting incidents were transferred from home to school and vice versa. Some originated from family feuds, manifesting through children at school.

Theme 3: Addressing Safety Incidents

Schools are tasked with formulating a Code of Conduct based on the School Safety Policy. Disciplinary committees address all reported incidents for the School Governing Bodies. Teachers are expected to assume the parental responsibilities concerning 'in loco parentis' principles and provide pastoral care to learners.

Teachers are supposed to involve students in co-curricular and extracurricular activities. SBSTs are expected to hold one-on-one sessions with victims and perpetrators and refer them to professionals to assist with emotional well-being if necessary. In essence, the school must play a pivotal role in the holistic development of learners and ensure that students grow and develop in a safe environment devoid of social ills.

Data concerning this theme revealed that even though all schools claim to have procedures for handling ill-disciplined learners, students do not trust these reporting systems. Therefore, they resort to violence and join gangs for protection. Hence, Lnr04 noted that learners establish their own justice systems. Lnr02 stated that the Principal protects the teachers over the well-being of students.

The study also revealed that schools fail to handle major safety incidents like fire. Only two schools (01 and 05) claimed to conduct fire drills and have evacuation plans. However, learners (Lnr01 and Lnr05) were unaware of such plans. Moreover, Lnr05 posited that they would assist in extinguishing the fire if it occurred during school hours. SG04 stated that everyone should care for themselves if a fire happened at the school. The inherent risk is that the absence of effective procedures to handle safety challenges leaves the learners to find their own solutions. Consequently, resorting to gangsterism and possession of sharp objects have become the primary means of self-protection. Teachers must spend too much time on safety challenges instead of teaching and learning. A pressing need for further research and developing effective procedures and programmes to tackle safety challenges and educate learners on the defence and coping mechanisms is a must.

Theme 4: Support From Stakeholders to Address School Safety Challenges

Education is a societal issue. Therefore, support from various stakeholders and role players is critical in addressing school safety challenges. In the US, police resources have been deployed to schools to protect teachers and students against intruders.

Brock et al. (2018:11) examined the number of expulsions in schools compared to the total incidents reported by law enforcement when police officers were stationed in schools. Their study suggested that even minor infringements faced extreme response measures even though no notable improvement in school safety was discernible.

Our study depicted that even though evidence of support from the local Police is present concerning the National School Safety Framework of linking schools to Police stations, such support has diminished over the past two years.

Participants largely concurred on the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown. SSO02, SSO03, and SSO05 rated police support as fair, whereas SSO01 and SSO04 considered it good, noting that the support from local Police stations was acceptable.

The study also revealed that support from parents is inadequate. PR01 and PR03 rated support from parents as 50/50, implying that 50% of parents actively support the school. SG05, PR02 and PR04 rated parental support as poor.

SG04 rated it as very poor, while SG05 reported that 50% of parents defend their children, 30% will first accuse teachers before hearing the complete story, and only 20% uphold school initiatives. The study indicated that parents occasionally side with their children without first understanding the matter from the teacher's perspective.

The inherent risk is that learners may become complacent and disregard school rules and regulations, jeopardising cordial relationships between parents and teachers. Consequently, teachers may become disillusioned and frustrated, neglecting their co-parenting responsibilities and ultimately hurting the learners' well-being.

Theme 5: Recommendations by Internal Role Players in The Management of School Safety

Internal stakeholders, including the Principals, Teachers, School Governing Bodies, and learners, are the first line of defence for school safety challenges. Whether directly or indirectly affected, they must re-live traumatic incidents when reporting and interacting with investigators and authorities.

The study found that Principals believe the School Management Teams (SMTs) must be pivotal in addressing school safety challenges. PR01 accentuated that the SMT must never assume that it is someone else's duty.

Furthermore, PR02 and PR03 concurred and recommended that each SMT member assume specific roles and be trained to address such incidents. PR05 suggested that SMT members should be held accountable for developing timetables and overseeing teachers' work.

They must ensure that teachers are responsible for supervising learners continually. He further posits that most incidents occur when the teacher is not in the classroom, during break or on the way to/from home.

SGB chairpersons suggested that SGM members must spearhead efforts to organise all stakeholders, including community-based structures. SG01, SG03, SG04, and SG05 recommended forging solid relationships between the school and parents.

SG02 and SG05 also advised providing parents with regular updates on safety matters affecting the school. They noted that parents should set a precedent: if they frequently visit the school and engage in projects, students will likely to follow suite. The study found that school safety officers play a pivotal role in maintaining order and discipline within the school environment. Their suggestions primarily revolved around preserving discipline in the classroom. SSO02 recommended creating a safety handbook to be distributed with scholastic stationery for every students. He also emphasised that safety tips should be integrated into every lesson. SSO01 advocated for the recording and addressing of every incident, regardless of its nature or magnitude, to prevent it from escalating.

Students suggested their peers should refrain from engaging in harmful activities such as alcohol and drug abuse. They emphasised the importance of always being aware of one's surroundings. Lnr05 encouraged the use of projects, campaigns, and posters to raise awareness among the community and fellow students about safety challenges and remedies. The study found that all internal stakeholders recommend that the Department of Education should employ 24-hour security officers to protect the schools. PR01 believed that surveillance cameras play an important role in deterring perpetrators from committing such acts knowing that they are being watched. SSO01, SSO02, and SSO03 suggested that the department should employ officials at the Circuit level to monitor compliance with minimum norms and standards for school safety. SSO02 further recommended the distribution of a safety handbook for all students. PR05 further recommended that principals and SGBs should be held accountable for avoidable safety incidents. PR02 and PR04 emphasised the need for regular workshops for teachers and SGB members on managing safety challenges. SSO01 recommended the expansion for the feeding scheme to needy students in quintile four and five schools. All learners agreed on the need for security officers to control access during the day and protect the school against vandalism at the night. The use of school-based officers has been shown to enhance school safety in the US. As Brock et al. (2018:74) noted, the government allocated resources (school-based police) to deal with incidents promptly as close as possible to the point or act of infringement.

Recommendations

After considering the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested: Mandatory record keeping of every incident, regardless of its magnitude. Submission and presentation of regular (quarterly) reports to the department and all stakeholders, including parents, learners, teachers, and community-based structures to raise awareness about the current trends and predict future trends on school safety incidents. Publishing quarterly incident statistics in the newsletter and/or local newspapers. Open discussions on community radio station talk shows and in public spaces. These discussions should be led by entities like the local Department of Education, SAPS, Department of Social Development, Department of Justice, local municipality and community-based organisations. Expanding National School Nutrition Programme to support needy learners in Quintile 4 and 5 schools. Given the poverty level and

unemployment rate as per the STATSSA report, poverty is no longer limited to the villages and townships, as purported by the programme managers. The impacts of COVID-19 have aggravated the volatile situation by collapsing small businesses and family livelihoods.

Providing schools with 24-hour security personnel to control access and protect schools against vandalism overnight. In light of challenges posed by COVID-19 lockdown and the advent of the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR), numerous schools have invested in ICT resources to improve education system. Such schools are targeted by criminals and millions, leading to significant losses through vandalism, theft and burglary. The security personnel may be strengthened by installation of surveillance cameras and alarm systems. Circuit offices be provided with personnel to monitor compliance with the minimum norms and standards for school safety. This might involve employing environmental health practitioners equipped with infrastructure inspection skills. Safety officers should conduct regular training for school officials on management of school safety challenges. Such training should be followed-up with monitoring and in-loco inspections. Management plans should be developed and monitored for compliance. Principals need to be held accountable for preventable safety incidents resulting from oversight or ignorance. Social skills such as defence mechanisms and coping strategies can be infused into teaching and learning in early grades. Learners be provided with a handbook on safety incidents management, code of conduct for learners and bill of responsibilities as part of scholastic stationery.

Strengthening school-based support teams by providing permanently appointed school-based social worker or psychologist to support learners and teachers. Home visits are conducted by such professionals to provide support to parents and learners in need.

CONCLUSION

The study reviewed the research problem and summarised key findings according to themes based on the study's objectives. While positive trends were observed, empirical evidence on the implementation of school safety policy by schools in Naboomspruit Circuit in the Waterberg District identified gaps, which have been outlined as recommendations. The research underscored a persistent need to bolster the capabilities of school management, SGBs, teachers, and students regarding their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, it emphasised the importance of engaging all stakeholders to collaboratively address school safety challenges.

Limitations

Given that the study was limited to selected schools in the Naboomspruit circuit, its findings pertain specifically to these schools or others in comparable contexts. These findings cannot be universally applied to every school within the district or province. However, educational authorities or stakeholders might utilise this study as a reference point in analogous situations.

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