

An Examination of School Safety Interventions in Gauteng

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ABSTRACT: According to the California School Board Association (CSBA, 2018) a safe school is one where teaching and learning were not distracted, disruptions are minimized, violence, drugs, bullying and fear were not present. In addition, where learners are not discriminated against, expectations for behaviour are clearly communicated, and consequences for infractions are consistently and fairly applied. Education carries many advantages as an important issue in one's life. It is key to the success in one's future allowing them to have many opportunities in life (Al-Shuaibi, 2014). Violence of some sort impedes equitable access to education, the right to dignity and security as outlined by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) and Action International (2007). Violence around schools is a major contributing factor to non-enrolment, school dropouts and non-completion of school (Amnesty International, 2008). In the financial year 2022/2023, the Gauteng Department of Community Safety conducted a study on an examination of School Safety interventions in Gauteng. The study acknowledged that school violence is still a challenge within Gauteng schools because learning and teaching is still compromised. The policies that should enhance the successful implementation of school safety interventions are either non-existent or poorly implemented. The article looked at the process that must be followed during the initial reporting of school violence. This study of the examination of school safety was necessary because it also looked at the different activities carried out by role players during the implementation. In context, the researcher examined the different interventions that were implemented to address the problem of school safety. A qualitative research approach was followed to gather data using a semi-structured in-depth interview focusing only on the top fifteen problematic schools within each corridor from the 150 problematic schools' database as identified by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). The study identified several challenges related to School Safety Interventions as implemented in Gauteng Schools. This includes lack of an integrated school safety plan that accommodates the activities of all role players.

KEYWORDS: School Safety, Bullying, violence, code of conduct.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The vision of the GDE in relation to school safety is that schools should be conducive for teaching and learning and are safe and secure in which all stakeholders work together to entrench safe schools where education thrives as a societal priority (GDE; 2016). In order to fulfil this vision, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the South African Police Services (SAPS) entered into a Collaborative Partnership Protocol Agreement (CPPA) to draft school safety plans and strengthen School Safety and Security Committees (SSSC's) to curb crime and violence. The protocol agreement is aimed at developing and supporting the implementation of the school-based crime prevention programmes and serves as a framework for close inter-departmental coordination to create safe, caring, secure, and child-friendly school environments that promote conducive, effective high quality and productive teaching and learning environments. According to the Gauteng Department of Community Safety (2020) it is important that all stakeholders with an interest in school safety come together and work in collaboration to create a conducive learning and teaching environment. School environments must be safe and secure spaces for learners, teachers, non-teaching staff and their local communities. There is a need for government and schools to create an environment in which physical, emotional and social well-being of learners and teachers are pivotal (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, n.d). A safe school refers to a school that is free of dangers or the possibility of harm is absent (Gina, 2013). It is a condition of being safe either psychologically or emotionally and freedom from danger, risk, or injury (Gina, 2013). Hernandez, Floden and Bosworth describe a safe school as a place free from violence and represented by an environment where there is no perceived fear. The Gauteng Department of Community Safety committed its efforts through the School Safety Programme to rid schools of incidents of violence such as bullying, physical violence and sexual abuse. This article looked at the status of school

violence in Gauteng and its causalities, and also examined the role and effectiveness of partnerships and programmes towards eradicating violence in schools. In this context, the researcher, examined the causes and effects of violence in Gauteng schools, key interventions being rolled out to respond to violence in schools and the measures put in place to address school violence.

In the end, this article proposes the adoption of an integrated approach towards school safety, development of school safety plans in consultation with stakeholders, the need for random and regular school visits, review of school safety guidelines, and the need for training and development – information sharing sessions and engagement with Save the Children South Africa. This will assist the role players to better understand their positions and responsibilities in relation to the school safety programme. The intended outcome created a platform for all the role players in order to take full ownership of the programme in the fight against school violence.

1.1 The aim of the article

The aim of this article is to examine the effectiveness of school safety interventions in Gauteng province in response to the scourge of violence in schools.

1.2 Research objectives.

This study sought to achieve the following objectives

- To examine the status of violence in Gauteng schools and their causalities
- To determine the effectiveness of school safety interventions in Gauteng schools
- To determine the role and effectiveness of partnerships as part of government's integrated strategy towards collaborative school safety interventions, and
- To influence policy reform towards the enhancement of school safety in the province.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative approach to collect data to achieve the objectives of the study. Qualitative research involves the collection of open-ended data through interviews from participants (Flick, 2007). The researcher employed both in-depth interview techniques as well as document analysis to gather data from the participants. In depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of participants to explore their perspective on a particular idea, program or situation (Boyce and Neale 2006:03). Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating both printed and electronic documents (Bowen, 2009). A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. A purposive sampling strategy was selected to fit the purpose of the study. The researcher adopted the corridor-based model to sample schools in the study. Gauteng province has five developmental corridors; the sampling procedure took cognizance of the corridor-based model. The researcher further narrowed down the study by focusing only on the top fifteen problematic schools within each corridor from the 150 high risk schools' data base (issued in 2020) as identified by the GDE

Data collection

The interviews involved asking each participant questions related to the School Safety Programme as implemented by the GDE and role players. Probing questions related to the programme where responses were not clear were also asked. Document analysis was done in order to scrutinize legislation, policies and guidelines related to the School Safety Programme. The Researcher took notes and recorded the interviews of each participant.

Data analysis

Recorded data was transcribed and categorized prior to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was undertaken for analyzing qualitative data. Qualitative data from the partial categorized questions was discussed in proportion to qualitative data to show a broader examination of the effectiveness of school safety interventions. In addition, coding was followed as a process of grouping evidence and labelling ideas so that they gradually show a broader viewpoint. Finally, data was presented in the discussion herein:

III. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The section that follows presents the findings of this study as well as the discussion related to the established findings. The study established that there are several inconsistencies that led to poor implementation of the School Safety Programme. These inconsistencies hamper the successful implementation of interventions that are designed to address school violence within schools in Gauteng province. It is noteworthy that the fragmented approach adopted by the role players is the main cause of the failure of this programme.

3.1 The role players understanding of the School Safety Programme

Role players in the implementation of the School Safety Programme are expected to be familiar with the school environment, educators, learners, support staff and the type of interventions that are required to address the problem of school violence (School Safety and Security Strategy, 2009-2014). The GDE as the custodian of the School Safety Programme has a responsibility to ensure that teaching and learning take place in a safe and secure environment (School Safety and Security Strategy, 2009-2014). As a starter, the School Safety Programme is aimed at ensuring that the school environment, learners, educators and support staff are safe at school. This programme is also viewed as a proactive intervention for school talks on drugs, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and random searches. In order to achieve the outcomes of the programme, GDE worked with other role players. All the role players have demonstrated that they know and understand what the School Safety Programme entails by identifying initiatives that they implemented within the high-risk schools in support of the programme. The initiatives that support the School Safety Programme are as follows; camps, prison visits, deployment of patrollers in order to identify people who are selling drugs so that they can inform school principals, and to support schools in the fight against bullying and substance abuse. In addition, the department provided schools with examples of policies that should be adjusted in order to advance the objectives of the programme. An emphasis was also placed on the role players to understand their responsibilities for the programme to prevail. In addition, customized policies were crafted based on the needs of individual schools. These policies are activated when there are incidents of violence and while new children are being registered, they remind them of the schools code of conduct and ensure that these policies are well narrated to all learners during school assembly which is normally held three times a week. New learners who become part of the school are provided with a package of these policies and they are also narrated to all the parents during school meetings in order to ensure that they are familiar with the policies. Educators within the school are also obliged to comply with these policies. Teachers within the school environment are guided by the same policies and follow a code of conduct when disciplining learners. The code of conduct outlines what is required of learners at school in terms of discipline, for example, no weapons, nor drugs, cellphones, and violence are allowed at school. To be precise, this programme is aimed at reducing the violence at school through educating learners about the dangers of committing crime. The role players' understanding, and narration of the school safety programme is in line with the School Safety and Security Strategy (2009-2014), and that is commendable as well as a positive starting point.

3.2 The roles and responsibilities of the role players

Role players have a responsibility to support the initiatives that are designed to fulfil the objectives of the School Safety Programme. Each role player is allocated a specific task to carry out. The accomplishment of the set goals and objectives are solely dependent on them (School Safety and Security Strategy 2009-2014). The responsibility of the GDE coordinators is to oversee the overall implementation of the School Safety Programme as a whole. Any wrongdoing that happens during the implementation of the programme should be attributed to them as the custodians of this intervention. They must ensure that every school has a school safety policy in place and they should provide the department with incident reports based on violence that takes place within the school premises. GDE coordinators are the central figure when it comes to school safety initiatives because they advise schools from the application of disciplinary procedures to bullies within the school environment. In addition, problematic learners are taken on prison tours to learn about the consequences of committing crime. Learners that are found with drugs are referred to the South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA) to assist with their counselling. Additionally, SANCA educates learners about the consequences of using drugs. Pastors are invited to pray for learners who are identified. The Community Policing Forum (CPF) assists with the deployment of patrollers, patrols schools during the day, helps to identify hot spots and educates learners about their role in the community. The GDCS coordinators' primary role is to coordinate School Safety Programmes. Moreover, the role of the SAPS also includes the creation of partnerships with school principals and other stakeholders to facilitate safety campaigns within schools. The City of Johannesburg's Social Work Services offer psychological services to the learners during school talks. The Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences Units (FCS) talk about the different types of sexual offences at school and what learners should do when they are sexually assaulted, whereas the detectives educate learners about the consequences of arrest and what happens when suspects are arrested. The JMPD teaches learners about road safety, and they conduct school patrols during school searches, and they come along with sniffer dogs to search for drugs and dangerous weapons. The Department of Health teaches learners about taking care of themselves, puberty and pregnancy. The Youth Crime Prevention Desk encourages learners to be involved in sporting activities.

3.3 The nature and status of school violence

School violence is increasing daily despite various interventions that the Department of Education puts in place to address this problem (Fish, Beckerly and Schroth). The conducive schooling environment for learning and teaching is becoming increasingly volatile because it is overwhelmed by a culture of school-based violence, and this is a matter of national concern (Human Rights Commission, 2006). The types of violence that are experienced within Gauteng schools are as follows: fighting, bullying, stabbing, dagga smoking and gangsterism. In fact, the state of violence within Gauteng schools is very bad. At times learners are reported for smoking cigarettes and dagga within the school premises. There are schools within Gauteng that are without proper access control because learners cut school boundary fences and that leads to vandalism. In addition, there are gangs from townships that often clash outside the school premises. It should be noted that violence differs from one school to the next. Some schools have plans in place to address school violence others are we without these.

3.4 The causes of violence in Gauteng

Van Jaarsveld and Prinsloo (2008) indicated that violence within schools can be caused by some of the following incidents: crime and violence in the community, ill-discipline, intolerance, easy access to school premises, unemployment, poverty, lack of recreational facilities, and overcrowding. These causes have a negative impact on learning and teaching. The effects of school violence resemble some of the following characters towards the learners; poor academic performance, bunking of classes, chaos, lost time and depression (De Wet and Smit, 2007). In addition, school violence within Gauteng schools is as a result of the social conditions within communities such as drugs and alcohol abuse which contributes to safety challenges experienced by schools. The greatest challenge that makes the situation worse, is absent parenting because some parents are not playing a meaningful role when it comes to the upbringing of their children. In addition, some of the incidents are as a result of the traumatic experiences that learners encountered outside the school premises. These traumatic experiences include anger which emanates from incidents, such as rape and other abuse that the learners endured throughout their lives. It should be recognized that school violence is more complex and, no one can claim it is caused by a single challenge, hence, socio-economic factors are some of the reasons that give rise to violent incidents experienced by schools. Learners also come from different family structures, some come from child headed families and others from underprivileged families. In addition, learners project different behaviors, at school and at home. When teachers find out about these tendencies, it becomes a problem, as learners react in a violent manner.

3.5 Key interventions rolled out to address school violence

The kind of interventions implemented to address school violence are determined by the type of incident at the time. In instances where there is a problem of gangsterism, substance and alcohol abuse, the school activates Psycho-Social Policy to address such as challenges. Stakeholders support each other in order to find answers to address school violence and social issues affecting schools. Events are organized in order to find solutions to this problem. School talks are arranged in order to sensitize learners about the negative impact of substance abuse. Camps are also held with learners from high-risk schools who have behavioural problems. The main aim of holding camps is to try and modify learners' behavior, while recognizing that overnight success will not be achieved. In instances where a learner passes away, the Department of Education provides counselling to the affected victims as well as members of staff. School talks with learners at hotspot areas is one of the main interventions implemented to address school violence. The school-based support teams interact with learners daily with the aim of identifying learners with additional problems and refer them to SANCA. In other circumstances, learners are provided with an opportunity to engage with young inmates. Ex-offenders also address them about the dangers of bullying. In addition, there is a Peer Mediation Programme where learners are taught about the issues of bullying, anger management, alcohol abuse and how to portray themselves as positive role models in society. Searches and patrols are assisted with visibility. Social Workers assist schools to deal with child headed households by counselling those learners and giving them guidance. The taxi industry helps with scholar transport and patrols around school premises whereas the SGB services the fire extinguishers and ensures that exit points are clearly marked. The dynamics of school violence vary from one school to another because of the nature of violence that schools experience. The interventions implemented are dependent on the type of violence taking place in a particular school. Through these interventions, GDE wants to ensure that teaching and learning takes place in a conducive environment without hindrance.

3.6 The impact of interventions towards school

The GDE as the custodian of the School Safety Programme is skeptical about the impact of the interventions applied in the fight against school violence. They are of the opinion that in certain cases, some learners' behaviors and attitude changes gradually, but others do not, and that is demonstrated by the rate of school dropouts. To some extent the interventions work but others do not because learners react differently. In

addition, the measures taken by the role players to address school violence are mostly reactive in nature because schools are visited after an incident is reported and that needs specific focus to address it. It should be noted that in areas where School Based Teams are active, there is continuous interaction with the learners daily and in the process problematic learners are identified and provided with the necessary intervention. As a result, other schools are optimistic that the available interventions are making the required difference within schools. It was observed that school searches failed to yield the required results in certain schools due to access control challenges, however, in other areas, the same intervention elicits a good response. The quality of patrollers that were identified is very poor and as a result their contribution in the fight against school violence is minimal. There are certain incidents that happen in front of them, and they are unable to take the appropriate steps to address it. The incidents of theft of copper cables found on the roof tops of schools, could have been avoided since it happens whilst patrollers are on duty.

3.7 The reporting of school violence

The Gauteng Department of Education provided all the schools with detailed guidelines that must be followed when reporting violence in schools. Schools within the province disregard the provided guidelines and acted contrary to this directive. In certain instances, educators monitor learners during ground duties and in that process, they pick up these occurrences. To a certain extent, the provided guidelines are optimally utilized. This fragmented approach hampers the successful implementation of this programme. Although cases are reported, they are not reported at a desired level. In certain schools there are incident books that are kept in the school Disciplinary Office where school violence is registered. On the one hand, problematic learners belong to gangs, and there are no written reports as a result of inaction, some learners managed to get away with murder. In a normal school setting, incidents of violence are often referred to educators, and some are reported directly to the office of the principal. In most instances, educators often receive complaints from some of the learners and they also pick them up during ground duties. In other schools, reported cases are referred to the SGB for disciplinary hearings. Furthermore, School-Based Support Teams assess cases and refer some of them to the Social Worker. In other circumstances, cases are referred to GDE. Cases of school violence are handled differently depending on the nature of violence involved. However, the fragmented approach as adopted by different schools is one of the weaknesses of this programme.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommendations are based on the findings of this report that exposes the challenges encountered in the implementation of the School Safety Programme. These recommendations are informed by the negative finding that was arrived at after all the available data was taken into consideration. All the shortcomings that affect the successful implementation are well documented by the GDE as the custodian of this programme. The following recommendations are outlined for the attention of all the role players to consider them:

4.1 Adoption of an integrated approach

Role players in the implementation of the school safety programme should be involved from the beginning of the planning process until it is finalized. They should work together and share information from their respective environments.

4.2 Development of school safety plan in consultation with the stakeholders

The GDE as the custodian of the School Safety Programme must ensure that an integrated plan with initiatives identified to address school violence is developed in consultation with all the role players. The role players should draft a plan that will include a list of schools to be visited.

4.3 Need for regular and random school visits

The role players visit schools after incidents have happened, therefore it is recommended that role players should conduct random unannounced school visits to assess compliance with school safety policies.

4.4 Need for training and development – Information sharing sessions

Role players were never exposed to any form of training before the commencement of the implementation of the School Safety Programme. It is necessary that the role players should be exposed to a certain level of training in order to enhance the objectives of the programme. Educators, parents and learners should be taught about the different forms of violence prevalent in schools. Seminars and workshops should be conducted as well.

4.5 Engagement with Save the Children South Africa

Save the Children South Africa is a non-governmental organization that is part of the world's largest independent development and rights-based organization for children in over 120 countries worldwide. This organization has shown interest in the School Safety Programme and offered to assist for the benefit of all the role players. In addition, Save the children South Africa indicated that they can train all the role players, run school safety interventions, empower school leadership, teach educators how to manage classrooms and many more initiatives. It is highly recommended that this NGO should partner with GDE for the successful implementation of this programme.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study has identified a few notable shortcomings during the evaluation of the implementation of school safety interventions. The study revealed that participants are familiar with this programme. Some of the identified challenges are trivial in nature in the sense that they could have been addressed if this programme was implemented correctly. Gauteng Schools experience violence daily and a conducive environment for teaching and learning in the province is compromised. The study discovered that policies which should augment the success of this programme are either non-existent or poorly implemented. All the efforts by the GDE to provide direction on how this programme should be carried out is failing to yield the intended results. It was also found that the initial reporting of violent incidents at school level is in shambles because schools apply it differently. The study also confirmed that role players are without an integrated plan that accommodates the activities of all combined. The failure by the role players to address school violence hampers learning and teaching within schools.

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