

School safety in rural schools: Are schools as safe as we think they are?

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In this study we explain the general legal principles that concern safety in schools and requirements with which schools should comply. Safety of learners, both physical and psychological, is researched as a phenomenon that cannot be ensured properly without effective management and planning. The subjects are principals in rural public primary schools in the Soutpansberg East Circuit of the Northern Province. The literature studies indicated a general rule that as school neighbourhoods become more and more violent, schools are also directly or indirectly affected. Creating safe schools involves designing various safety awareness programmes and strategies, as well as mobilising school support networks. Principals ought to have a knowledge and understanding of relevant legislation and also have the skills to implement legislations and policies. The interview responses indicate that safety strategies and programmes that are applied to provide a peaceful school environment in the area are not sufficient and should be improved.

Introduction and contextualisation of the problem

Introduction

The problem of violence in schools, like the related problem of violence in society, has become one of the most pressing educational issues in schools. School violence is no longer a stranger in rural public schools. Time and again there are media reports of assaults, violence (emotional and/or physical) and injuries to learners while they are at school. (*Sowetan*, 30 May 1996:4, *Sowetan*, 24 June 1996:3). The school physical facilities, including school buildings and grounds, also pose safety problems. The threat of violence constitutes a fundamental violation of the social contracts between the school and the community. According to Noquera (1996:8), if effective measures to address the problems are not taken soon, support for public education could be irreparably jeopardised. This needs to be addressed by school management.

Safety and environment

Teaching and learning cannot take place in an unsafe environment. The art of creating a peaceful school environment poses great challenges to school management. It is stipulated in the Bill of Rights (Act No. 108 of 1996, Section [24]) that every person has the right to an environment that is not detrimental to his health or well-being. This right also applies to learners, and in principle protects them from being exposed to harmful environments, including the school. The educator, in addition to his duty to teach and educate, is also required to provide educational, physical and mental safety to learners (Oosthuizen, Botha, Bray, Marais, Maritz, Van der Westhuizen & Van Schalkwyk, 1994:26). Safety is not a matter of rules and regulations.

Role of educators

A positive and responsible attitude to safety is all important (Briely, 1991:xix). The educator should provide proper supervision, instructions and control to learners to ensure their safety. Bray, Van Wyk and Oosthuizen (1989:96-97) state that children sometimes act absent-mindedly especially when they are in a group. It is therefore the legal duty and the responsibility of the educator to provide sufficient supervision, and to safeguard learners from reasonable foreseeable harm or danger. The amount and degree of supervision, as well as the standard of care, could depend on variables such as age of the learners, type and novelty of the activity, environment where the activity is taking place and the opinion of those in charge (Saunders, 1994:8, Minor & Minor, 1991:1). The educator is expected to act as a prudent father of the family, because in his status and position, is delegated to act in the place of the parent (*in loco parentis*) (Beckmann, Klopper, Prinsloo & Roos, 1995:50; 104; Alexander & Alexander, 1992:282). The educator must

therefore fulfil his/her duty of care in such a way that a safe environment which is conducive for learning is created.

Schools included in research

This research was conducted in the rural [schools in the country side], public schools in the Soutpansberg East Circuit of Northern Province. The schools in this area are experiencing safety problems that are not [so] unique, but which have relevance to other South African schools. The safety problem is compounded by the following reasons: schools are situated in high poverty areas, hence school vandalism, theft and bullying; great numbers of parents are illiterate, hence a lack of active parental involvement in the education of learners; learners' belief in witchcraft; school facilities that are not safe; a gradual increase in violence and crime in school neighbourhoods; and vague perceptions about the need for safety programmes in schools. Principals at ten schools were randomly selected and interviewed for this research.

Effect on the efficient functioning of the school

The above problems have an influence on learners' performance and implications for school management. Like all other school activities, the safety of learners cannot be dealt with separately for specific occasions or purposes on an *ad hoc* basis. It should be managed and interwoven with all routine school administration functions. As has already been said above, violence which occurs in schools, the carrying of weapons, and the unruly and unbecoming behaviour of other learners are a reflection of what is happening in society and the school neighbourhoods. The school and the parent community should therefore work together to create a peaceful school environment. Schools alone cannot function as a panacea for these problems (Furlong & Morrison, 1994:147; Saunders, 1994:3).

Statement of the problem

The persistence of media reports on the issue of a lack of safety of learners in schools, assaults, injuries and violence lead to the following question:

- To what extent is the safety of learners, in order to ensure that they are not physical or mentally harmed at school, ensured in the rural public primary schools in the Soutpansberg East Circuit of Northern Province? By using the phrase "the safety of learners" reference is made to the freedom from danger or injury or affording security or not to be exposed to risks. Cachalia, Cheadle, Davis, Haysom, Maduna and Marais (1994:100) indicate that safety also refers to an environment which is not detrimental to one's health or well-being. To deal with this issue, the following questions will be answered:

- What is it that makes certain schools unsafe for learners when others are safe?
- What are the current safety plans and measures applied in schools in the area under investigation?

Aims and objectives of the study

The aim of this research project was to investigate the current extent to which the safety of learners is ensured in the rural public primary schools in the Soutpansberg East Circuit in Northern Province. Furthermore, it was aimed to identify practical implications of the maintenance of physical facilities and the implementation of safety policies for education management together with the school governing body.

Other objectives to investigate were:

- safety threats that are experienced by the schools;
- the current safety plans, rules and measures that are applied to ensure the safety of learners;
- some special school settings or features in rural public primary schools in the Soutpansberg East Circuit in Northern Province which pose problems with regards to the safety of learners.

Recommendations will also be made for guidance to make rural public primary schools safer for effective learning.

Method of research

Literature study

Introduction

A brief review of relevant literature was conducted to gather information, and to evaluate a conceptual analysis of the issue of safety in schools. Factors which contribute to unsafe conditions in schools, and the lack of safe school planning were identified.

Legislation

A study of relevant legislation indicates that there are laws and regulations that are aimed at the protection of children in general, and those that are aimed specifically at the learners. e.g. The Domestic Violence Act 1998 Act No. 116 of 1998 (Republic of South Africa, 1998) and The Child Care Amendment Act 1996 Act 96 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). These acts compel the educator to report to the police if they have reasonable suspicion that the learner has been ill-treated, or suffers from injuries, the probable cause of which was deliberate. It is easy for educators to detect the signs of ill-treatment of children, because they have regular contact with learners. They can also detect any change in learners' scholastic performance, behaviour and appearance. According to Squelch (1995:3) the ill-treatment of children is related to physical, emotional and social abuse and neglect. Section 10 of the South African Schools Act (SASA) (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) provides for the protection of learners against physical and mental harm. Beckmann, Foster & Smith (1997:11) state that the intention of section 10(2) of SASA appears to be to prohibit the infliction of corporal punishment on learners by the school authorities, and is in keeping with the Constitutional right of the persons generally "as embodied in section 12(1)(c) and (e) and 28(1)(d) of the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996b) "... to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources" and "not to be treated or punished in a cruel or inhuman or degrading way" and children in particular" to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation."

The importance of education law

Since educators are bounded by above-mentioned laws it is imperative to have a knowledge about them to protect themselves from being sued. Therefore, educators should have a working knowledge of education law. As Bondesio, Beckmann, Oosthuizen, Prinsloo and Van Wyk (1994:4) stated "... it is important that each of the partners in education should be abreast of the rights and duties concerning education allocated to him by the law." As a professional, as stated in *S. v. De Blom* 1977 (3) SA 513 (A), an educator should have a knowledge of the Law of education and can never invoke as a defence ig-

norance of the law concerning of his profession. A knowledge of education law is important to educators because it:

- regulates education
- helps them understand processes and legal principles
- determines the legality of decisions
- enables the educator to act with confidence without getting problems
- helps them to look after their own interests
- keeps them abreast of legal requirements
- provides a framework for decision-making
- indicates how to deal with conflict and regulation
- demarcates their roles and responsibilities

Empirical studies

For the purpose of data collection for this research, semi-structured and open ended interviews were conducted. Observations were made of the school settings which may pose safety problems for each school. Photographs were also taken as evidence of physical facilities (Figures 1, 2 and 3). The interview schedule was divided into two sections. Section A dealt with school physical facilities and Section B dealt with current safety plans and programmes at schools, as well as with people involved in the designing and implementation of those programmes. The conclusions made from findings of this nature generated a pool of information which may help solve safety problems in schools. The Soutpansberg East Circuit has 37 schools of which 29 are rural public primary schools. Ten principals were randomly selected and interviewed.

Findings

Responsibility of School Governing Bodies

The maintenance of school physical facilities, including cleaning and security, falls within the ambit of the responsibilities of a public school's governing body. The school governing body is given the authority to control school property, buildings and grounds occupied by the school (section 21(1)(a) of SASA).

Physical facilities

During the course of the interviews and observations, it was found that most of the schools surveyed do not have enough classrooms to accommodate all learners. Where classrooms are available, the condition of these classrooms is not safe for the learners (Figures 3 and 4). The walls are cracked, windows are broken, floors are in complete disrepair and need renovations. Some schools have built flimsy additional classrooms made of planks, and apply cow dung to the floors. The schools do not have safe school grounds, nor organised sportsfields (Figures 1 and 5). Fifty percent of the schools do not have playgrounds. In these cases, learners play outside in the field where tall grass, rocks, litter, holes, snakes, etc. pose a threat to their safety. The other 50% use community grounds that are not well maintained. Grounds that are not well maintained pose a threat to the safety of the learners for there may occur holes and litter and unsteady stairs or pavilions. This results in injuries to learners. In terms of section 28 of CRSA, all children must be protected from danger. Seventy percent of the schools use pit latrine systems, which can also be unsafe, especially for younger learners (Figures 2 and 6) (see also Appendix).

Safety programmes

The safety programmes applied, differed from one school to the other because of the uniqueness of each school's setting and problems (Figures 7 and 8). Responses obtained from principals, when asked about the safety missions and safety policies of their schools, indicated that most of the principals do not have a clear understanding of what is meant by the terms "mission statement" and "policies", nor of the importance thereof. This might be the reason why most of the principals interviewed did not have written safety mission statements and policies for their schools. According to Sithole (1991:91) a mission statement defines the institution, and the purpose of its existence.



Figure 1 The sportsfield at a rural school



Figure 2 Pit toilets at a rural school



Figure 3 A classroom at a rural school

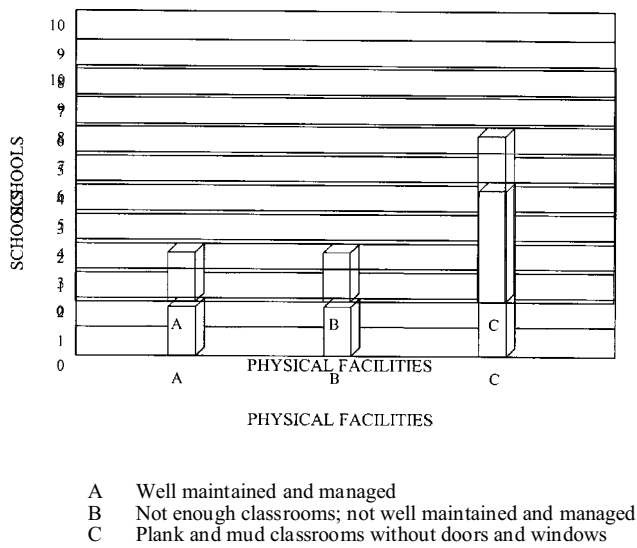


Figure 4 Maintenance of school physical facilities

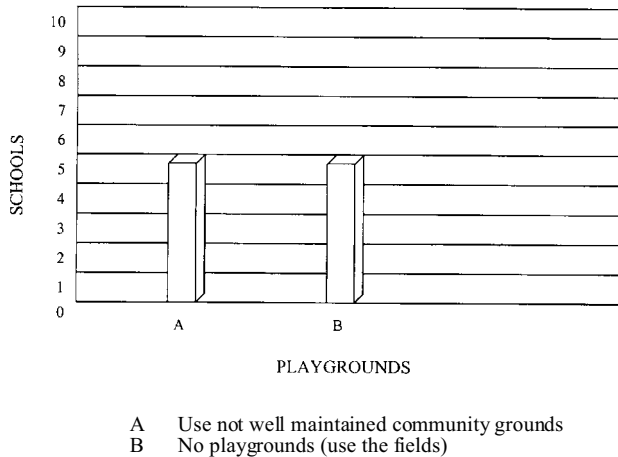


Figure 5 Availability of playground

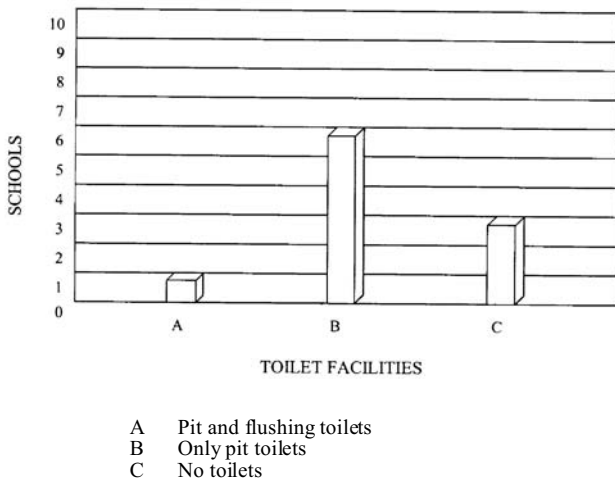


Figure 6 Availability of toilet facilities

Therefore a safety mission statement will define the school's intention to adhere to the right of the child to be protected (section 28 of CRSA) where the safety policy will guide all the stakeholders on implementing safety precautions. In the absence of mission statements and

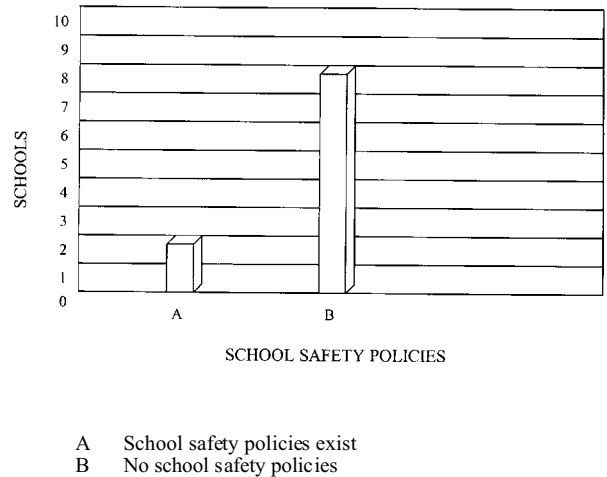


Figure 7 Existence of school safety policies

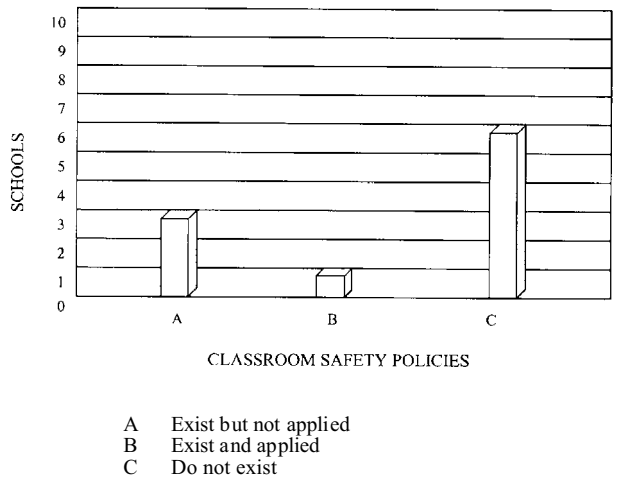


Figure 8 Existence and application of classroom safety rules

policies, there is a considerable loss of direction and plans which the institution should follow. According to Prinsloo and Beckmann (1988:135) education departments require that each school should have a clear safety programme and policy for learners.

When asked about safety committees and related issues, the responses indicated that some schools have an individual teacher to handle other school issues, but none has committees which deal specifically with safety issues. The Canadian Safe School Task Force (1994:340) suggests that each school should establish a main school safety committee that will be divided into subcommittees. This is to ensure that peace and safety are maintained fairly in various school situations.

More safety threats

Other safety threats that were discovered, but not arranged in order of frequency, were continued fights on the school property during class hours and on playgrounds; sniffing of fumes such as glue and benzene; unruly behaviour; weapons such as knives; alcohol abuse; and learners' belief in witchcraft. Learners were frightened that they might be bewitched. This results in a psychological (mental) threat. This can, however, also be a physical threat because a person who is viewed as a witch can be harmed (attacked) or even killed by others. Fifty per cent of the principals believe that corporal punishment is the best method for maintaining school discipline. It is in use in most of the schools surveyed which results in being an infringement upon learners' right not to be tortured in any way (section 12(1)(d) of CRSA) and a

violation of section 10 of SASA which prohibits the administering of corporal punishment.

Not only can these educators be prosecuted but these problems disturb the smooth running of the school and impede the learners' progress.

Conclusion

Safety policies and/or rules existed and were applied at 10% of the schools. At another 20%, safety policies existed but were not applied to ensure safety while at 70% of the schools no safety policies or rules existed and nothing was done to ensure safety for the learners on the school property or during official school activities (see Appendix).

From the investigations carried out in this research project the following deductions were made regarding the aims of the study set out earlier:

- Different forms of physical violence are experienced in schools.
- Schools lack mission statements regarding safety.
- Schools lack detailed safety policies.
- Schools do not have enough safety rules and lack constant rule enforcement procedures.
- Schools do not have safety committees.
- School physical facilities pose threats to safety.
- There are perceived psychological and physical threats caused by the learners' belief in witchcraft. Learners are scared that they may be bewitched and may even be killed or attacked by others for being viewed as witches.
- Learners bring weapons such as knives and other sharp objects to school, sniff fumes (such as benzene) and are involved in fights. These cause both physical and mental harm to learners.

Recommendations

All schools should expressly pay attention to safety issues and compile comprehensive safety plans and strategies which take cognisance of, among others, the matters listed below:

Clarification of a school safety mission statement

It is important to amplify the mission statement of a school. The mission statement of a school should reflect the context in which the school wishes academic learning to take place. The entire staff and school governing body should be involved and be acquainted with the mission statement of the school. The following fictitious example of a mission statement "... to learn in a safe and secure environment, free of violence, drugs and fear" enhances in the specific school's legal position to create policies promoting a safe, caring and disciplined school environment. Statements as referred to above may markedly increase the validity and credibility of the school's effort to create and preserve a safe school environment for this will prove that the school governing bodies made the safety of the learners their priority and this will contain measures to ensure the learners' safety.

Comprehensive school safety policy and rules

Each school should draw up an explicit school safety policy and a system of safety rules. This is to ensure that behaviour expectations and procedures are clearly communicated, consistently enforced and applied fairly. The enforcement procedures should be in line with SASA.

Providing training programmes for teachers and principals

Special in-service training programmes in the area of learner behaviour management should be provided for teachers and principals. Teachers must develop coping skills and techniques for controlling classroom behaviour and dealing with parents. This type of skills building and training is necessary to ensure the educational effectiveness of teachers as well as their personal safety.

Banning of all forms of non-physical intimidation

Name-calling, verbal abuse, sarcasm and bullying should be added to

the learner's code of conduct as actionable offences. Such threatening behaviour should not be tolerated.

The zero tolerance approach

Schools should adopt a "zero tolerance approach" in order to reduce school violence and crime. This approach involves stating exactly what unacceptable behaviour and acts with regard to drugs and weapons are, and indicating very clearly what the consequences will be for those who transgress. The success of this approach lies in the absolute certainty that certain forms of conduct will have consequences in the form of the withdrawal of privileges, suspension and even recommendation for expulsion.

Establishment of a school safety response team

Each school should establish a response team that comprises volunteer teachers, learners, parent (as part of school governing body) and members of the community. This team should receive training which covers areas such as conflict resolution, anger management, breaking up fights, mediation techniques and first-aid. The main team might be subdivided into sub-teams that will be assigned specific responsibilities.

School-community partnerships

Schools should be encouraged to form partnerships with the school community in order to mobilize a system of school support networks. A tightly knit social network of approving and disapproving people are more effective determinants of learners' behaviour and character than just a system of school rules. Practical involvement of all interested parties is an indicator that the problem really exists. The interested parties and all who are involved in the partnership should be involved in making future decisions. This will cause people to be more committed and co-operative in seeking solutions to the problem. Creating safe schools is a community function; therefore schools cannot successfully achieve it alone.

Improving and maintaining school physical facilities

The responsibility for maintaining school physical facilities is vested in the school and its governing body. School governing bodies should be trained in areas concerning school governance and fundraising in order to maintain school buildings and grounds. The researchers are aware that in some cases the governing body may have none of the abilities and that most of the parents in the researchers' area of study are illiterate. More can still be done to involve them in protecting and maintaining available physical resources. The researchers strongly appreciate the services that the farming community is rendering to schools in the area of maintenance of school ground and related issues.

Because there are Acts which protect learners from any form of physical or emotional violence, the school management team and its governing body should set procedures in schools to enforce such laws.

Government should ensure, by means of inspection control, that requirements set by legislation are dealt with by the governing bodies and that they are in place.

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Appendix

Summary of interviews

School physical facilities

1. Well maintained and managed: 2 schools
2. Not enough classrooms and not well maintained and managed : 2 schools
3. Plank and mud classrooms without doors and windows: 6 schools.

School grounds and sport fields

1. Use community grounds — not well maintained: 5 schools
2. Don't have playground — clean field which lead to injuries: 5 schools

Toilet facilities

1. Pit and flushing toilets — self-maintained: 1 school
2. Only pit toilets — not maintained: 6 schools
3. No toilets: 3 schools

School safety policy

- Exist: 2 schools
No policy: 8 schools

Classroom safety rules

- Exist: 3 schools
Applied: 1 school
No rules: 6 schools

Bullying threats

- Bullying reported by 7 schools
Fist fights, knives, razors, stone throwing, rape, drug abuse, open wells.

Handling of problems

- Only one school follows disciplinary procedure.
At six schools corporal punishment is applied.