Inclusion of learners' views in safety and security matters at schools

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Violence and bullying in schools keep escalating and have become a world-wide problem – also in South Africa. This problem is continuing unabated, despite the different intervention strategies in place. Intervention strategies include the Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) programme, the National School Safety Framework (NSSF), the Safe Schools Programme (SSP), the Hlayiseka Early Warning System, the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework, Speak Out, We Care, and the life orientation curriculum. As part of the intervention strategies, learners' views should be included in the decision-making process. With this article I intend to report on a study that was conducted on the inclusion of learners' views in matters focusing on safety and security at schools. A qualitative approach was used in the study. Observation, interviewing, and document analysis were used as methods of data generation. Data were analysed by developing themes. The findings reveal that learners' views were not included in matters related to safety and security at schools. I argue that the main reason for the continuing violence is that stakeholders who are in authority do not include the views of learners in the development and the implementation of safety and security strategies. I suggest that all stakeholders should be assisted in understanding the value of an inclusive approach in the decision-making process.

Keywords: inclusion; learners; safety; security; views

Introduction

Violence and bullying in schools keep escalating, have become world-wide problems and are currently receiving much attention. South Africa is not immune to this scourge. It is one of the countries that is experiencing an increase in violence and bullying in schools. The problem has also received much attention in the South African media recently. According to the South African Council for Educators (SACE), violence appears to be a problem in the majority of South African schools. It should, however, be pointed out that this is not a new phenomenon in South African schools. The difference is the serious nature of the violence currently taking place in schools. It should also be noted that South Africa is an emerging economy, and that, as such, it needs to invest in its citizens. However, investment in human capital can only succeed in a conducive environment. It is, therefore, vital for a country such as South Africa to have safe and secure schools, because, as Burton and Leoschut (2013) indicate, school violence contributes to a situation where children play truant from school. This ultimately leads to lower educational achievement, which can potentially affect the economic performance of the country. I trust that through this study all stakeholders will learn about the importance of involving learners in issues related to safety and security in schools. Incidents of violence include stabbings, shootings, drug peddling, assaults, and rapes. This is happening despite the various intervention initiatives that are being undertaken to try to ensure the safety and security of learners in schools. Among the initiatives are interventions such as the CFS programme (Junaid, 2011), which emphasises an integrated approach to issues of safety and security at schools, the NSSF (Makota & Leoschut, 2016) and the SSP (Shaw, 2001). Other interventions include the Hlayiseka Early Warning System (Gevers & Flisher, 2012), the CSTL framework (Mathews & Gould, 2017) Speak Out, We Care, and the life orientation curriculum (Ngidi, 2018).

Added to these interventions are legal and regulatory initiatives. They include the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996a) and the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Department of Social Development, 2005).

It should, however, be noted that despite all these initiatives intended to curb the scourge, the problem of school violence seems to continue unabated.

Literature Review

Literature on school violence reveals little about studies that have focused on the inclusion of learners' views on issues related to safety and security in schools. Instead, the emerging typology focuses on themes such as the causes, prevalence of violence in schools, the intervention strategies (Barnes, Brynard & De Wet, 2012; Dunkle, Jewkes, Brown, Yoshihama, Gray, McIntyre & Harlow, 2004; Mncube & Harber, 2013; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013; Ngqela & Lewis, 2012; Wolhuter & Russo, 2013), patterns of violence (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Masitsa, 2011; Myburgh, Poggenpoel & Nhlapo, 2015), and policies on school safety (De Waal, 2011; Levin, Van Niekerk, Katz & Stuurman, 2016; Prinsloo, 2005).

The lack of studies on inclusion of learners' views on issues related to safety and security in schools creates a gap in terms of understanding learners' contributions in dealing with safety and security issues at schools. Le Roux and Mokhele (2011:127) summarise this when they say "Clearly the issue of school violence, its causes and possible solutions warrant further consideration." It is within this context that a study of this nature was undertaken, focusing on inclusion of learners' views on issues related to safety and security at

schools in trying to deal with the problem of continuing violence in schools.

It should, however, be noted that there are some who propose different solutions to the problem. Burton and Leoschut (2013) suggest that there should be an evaluation of the short- and long-term impact of safety initiatives prior to the roll-out of any intervention strategy in schools, and that this should be done in partnerships with all relevant stakeholders. They further propose that learners should be given a voice to express themselves in terms of places where they feel safe or unsafe and their safety concerns. This is in line with the proposal by Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) that schools should place the responsibility for safety and security on the learners.

Theoretical Framework

Ngqela and Lewis (2012) assert that theories on school violence are multifaceted and multi-theoretical. Some of the theories outlined are Anderson's General Affective Aggression Model (GAAM), Bandura's social learning theory, Hirschi's social control theory, and Agnew's general strain theory. In their theory on participation, Gastager, Patry and Wiedemair (2010) outline different facets of participation.

They outline participation designed by adults, or co-determination, where information is given and learners take part in the decision-making, but adult stakeholders, such as teachers, principals, and parents, determine the basic structure. Then there is participation designed and directed by learners, or self-determination while adult stakeholders take responsibility for the outcome. Lastly, there is self-administration. This is the kind of participation where learners do everything in an autonomous way. In the study reported on here, inclusion refers to the form of participation where learners take part in decision-making but adult stakeholders determine the basic structure. This form of inclusion was adopted as issues related to the safety and security of learners cannot be left entirely in their hands. All stakeholders should be involved. Furthermore, the choice allowed me to determine the extent to which learners were involved in decision-making on matters related to safety and security at schools.

Statement of the Problem

Violence in South African schools continues unabated. As the SACE (2011) indicates, it is occurring despite the different intervention initiatives that are in place. It is so serious that unless something drastically is done, effective teaching and learning may be compromised at schools. Incidents of violence include stabbings, shootings, assaults, and rapes and most affect the learners (Makota & Leoschut, 2016). Since learners are the ones who are most affected by violence, there is a need to involve them in initiatives undertaken to try to ensure their safety and security at schools. Several studies have been conducted on the causes of violence in schools, the prevalence of violence in schools, and the intervention strategies intended to prevent these from happening. They include studies by Barnes et al. (2012), Dunkle et al. (2004), Mncube and Harber (2013), Ncontsa and Shumba (2013), Ngqela and Lewis (2012), and Wolhuter and Russo (2013). It would seem that no studies have focused on the inclusion of learners' views in the initiatives that are undertaken to try to address issues of safety and security at schools. It is within this context that this study was conducted, looking at the extent to which the views of learners have been included in the development and execution of the Safe Schools Programme in South Africa.

The main question of this study was "To what extent are the views of learners included in the development and the implementation of the Safe Schools Programme?"

As a response to the question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

- Are the views of learners included in the development of the Safe Schools Programme?
- Are the views of learners included in the implementation of the Safe Schools Programme?
- What criteria do learners use to judge their inclusion in the decision-making process?
- Are learners included in the decision-making process on safety and security in schools?

Research Methodology

For this study I adopted a qualitative approach to explore the inclusion of learners in decision-making and the continuing violence in schools. According to Mills and Birks (2014), the kinds of questions that researchers ask determine the research methodology to be used. In this case, the question focused on inclusion of the views of learners in development and implementation of the SSP. The qualitative research methodology helped me to use naturally occurring data and for finding the sequences in which the participants' meanings and practices were deployed (Silverman, 2014). It also helped me to be context-sensitive and to examine the investigated phenomenon by focusing on the lived experiences of the participants concerning their inclusion in the development and execution of the SSP within the school context.

Research Design

A case study design was adopted for this study. The adoption of this kind of a design was due to its potential to help in responding to the questions, as indicated. This was done with cognisance of the criticisms against the use of this kind of a research design (Campbell & Stanley, 1966; Garger, 2013; Krusenvik, 2016; Starman, 2013; Willis, 2014). Use of this design was prompted by the advantages

in conducting a study such as this one, where the focus is on inclusion of the views of learners in the development and the implementation of the SSP (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Krusenvik, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The design assisted me to relate with the participants and to understand the nuances of meaning in what they were saying with regard to the inclusion of the learners' views.

Sampling/Selection of Cases

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted for this study. The choice of the sampling strategy was guided by the purpose of and the research approach adopted for this. As Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003) explain, the use of purposive sampling is helpful in exploring and understanding a phenomenon, in this case, the extent to which the views of learners were included in the development and execution of the SSP. Furthermore, using purposive sampling helped in the selection of participants who possessed the characteristics that helped to answer the research question. The strategy also helped in selecting schools that were cooperative in terms of obtaining the necessary data, and that were willing to contribute in the construction of data.

Five secondary schools in the Capricorn District, Limpopo province, were selected as the research settings. The schools were easily accessible and named Schools A, B, C, D and E.

Thirty-seven participants (seven from each school) participated in this study and included the following: principals, chairpersons and vice-chairpersons of school governing bodies (SGBs), two teachers, the president and vice-presidents of the representative council of learners (RCL), and two officials from the Department of Education (DoE) who were responsible for safety and security at schools.

Data Generation

I used three methods to generate data, namely observations, interviewing and documents. Using three methods helped to maximise the dependability and trustworthiness of the study.

Observation

Observation was done in schools where implementation was assumed to be taking place. I attended three SGB meetings at each school, where different issues were discussed, including safety and security. I adopted the participant-observer role, and participants were informed that I was attending the meetings as a researcher. On the days that I attended the meetings, I went to the schools early to observe issues such as access at the gate and learners' involvement to absorb the language used in the setting and to understand the nuances of meaning that the participants attached to the phenomenon (Patton, 2015), in this case, safety and

security issues at schools. It also helped me to observe the extent to which learners' ideas were included in matters related to safety and security at schools.

Interviewing

A number of issues from the observations were of great concern to me. They included the ambiguity of learners' views on safety and security matters at schools, the criteria that learners used to identify schools that were safe and secure, inclusion of learners in the decision-making process on safety and security in schools, and the views of the other stakeholders on inclusion of learners in the decision-making process.

In order to get clarity on these issues, I conducted interviews with some of the participants. The interviews helped me get a comprehensive view of the occurrence (Kvale, 2007) of learners' inclusion in the development and execution of the SSP. The specificity of the interviews was in line with how Patton (2015:437) differentiates between interviews, namely "informal conversational interview[s]", the "interview guide" and the "standardized open-ended interview." The initial intention was to use informal conversational interviews. After interaction with the learners (who did not attend the SGB meetings), during observation, and following the advice of Patton (2015), informal conversational interviews and semi-structured interviews were conducted.

It was during the informal conversational interviews that I interacted with the teachers and the principals informally, and talked about general issues that had a bearing on inclusion of the views of learner participants pertaining to safety and security in schools. Since the participants were accustomed to me, they felt free to discuss certain issues with me, which they probably would not have done with someone whom they did not know. Rubin and Babbie (2010) explain that when participants are familiar with the researcher, they are able to talk freely. The participants in this study could thus talk freely about inclusion of the views of learners in the decision-making process on matters related to safety and security at schools. Semi-structured interviews were used as they provide structure for comparison between different interviewees in the study, through use of the same questions (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Documents

Various documents related to the phenomenon under study were also consulted. The documents consulted included the following: The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (RSA, 1996b); the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996; the Implementation Guidelines: Safe and Caring Child-friendly Schools in South Africa of 2008 (DoE & UNICEF, 2008); the Children's Act 38 of

2005; the NSSF of 2015 (Department of Basic Education [DBE] & Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, 2015); and the School Infrastructure Safety and Security Guidelines (first version, DBE, RSA, 2017) of 2017. These documents provided me an idea of the legislative framework issues related to inclusion of learners in decision-making on matters related to safety and security at schools.

Ethical Considerations

Banister (2007) and Stevens (2013) assert that ethical issues play a very important role in qualitative research and are more complex than in quantitative research. This is because some of the methods used are more personal and invasive. To protect the rights, safety, dignity and well-being of the participants, all ethical issues were considered in this study. I informed the participants about the study, and also indicated that their participation in the study was voluntary. Permission was sought from the participants for their comments to be recorded on tape. The participants' identities were kept secret and they were referred to by pseudonyms. This was done as a way of protecting them from harm that may have resulted from their participation in the study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began during fieldwork to help me reflect on the data generated and to do follow-ups where necessary (Ahmad, 2017; Sutton & Austin, 2015). During fieldwork, I interacted with the participants and took notes on the different activities in order to understand the context from the participants' perspective. Since data from the interviews were recorded on tape, I had to transcribe the recordings. This was done by listening to the recorded interviews and writing down the conversations verbatim. Each interview session lasted about 25 minutes, which resulted in transcripts of six to seven pages each. Significant statements were noted and meanings formulated from these. This was done by developing codes. The formulated meanings were sorted into categories and themes (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Themes were created from the data, the research question, and the literature. They were: inclusion in the development of the intervention programme; inclusion in the execution of the intervention programme; criteria that learners used to judge their inclusion in the decision-making process; and inclusion of learners in the decision-making process on matters related to safety and security at schools.

Findings

From the results there is strong evidence that stakeholders who were in positions of authority, such as policymakers, principals, and members of

school management teams (SMTs), did not include the learners' views in the development and execution of school safety and security strategies in all the participating schools. To understand the findings better, individual themes are discussed in the following section.

Inclusion in the Development of the Intervention Programmes

Based on the results, it was apparent that the participants seemed to differ regarding the inclusion of learners' views in the development of the intervention programmes. In Schools A, C, and E, the principals did not see the need for including learners' views in the development of the intervention programme. By contrast, in Schools B and D, the principals believed in inclusion of learners.

In Schools A, C and D, the SGB members did not see the need for inclusion of learners in the development of intervention programme, while in Schools B and E they saw the need to include learners. In Schools A and D, the teachers saw the need to include learners, while in Schools B, C and E, the teachers did not see the need for inclusion. A teacher in School A confirmed the inclusion of learners by stating as follows: "*We do include them in line with the South African Schools Act. Things have now changed.*" Members of the RCL in School D were included in developing the intervention programme. In Schools A, B, C, and E, learners were not included.

It thus appears that the principals and SGB members seemed to be the ones dominating issues related to the safety and security programme, while members of the RCL were excluded. It may also be that the DoE perpetuates exclusion of learners by only communicating with the principals and the SGB members, thus excluding the learners. The DoE officials confirmed that they communicated with the principals even though they were aware that some stakeholders were not privy to the information communicated.

As Hunt (2007) indicates, a lack of communication with learners leads to exclusionary practices, which disempowers them. This causes learners to undermine decisions taken by the other stakeholders because of these exclusionary practices.

Inclusion in the Execution of the Programme

Based on the evidence, there is an indication that learners are not included in the execution of the SSP. Members of the RCL in School A indicated that they were only included in certain issues, but not all. This might mean that the other stakeholders decided on the issues related to implementation of the safety programme in which the learners could be involved. A lack of learner inclusion might be due to the way that learners were viewed by some

of the stakeholders, namely that the learners were part of the problem. Consequently, for them it did not make sense to include learners in the implementation process.

Criteria that Learners Use to Judge their Inclusion in the Decision-making Process

To understand what learners meant by being included in matters related to safety and security at schools, I asked them what criteria they used to judge their inclusion in the decision-making process. The responses indicate that according to them, inclusion meant that they should be allowed to work with security guards at the gate to search their fellow learners in a bid to deal with those who brought unwanted items onto the school premises. They further indicated that they should be allowed to deal with the movement of learners inside and outside the school premises. Their concern about learners outside the school premises was because they viewed learners coming from outside the school premises as a threat to their safety. RCL members in School C expressed this by saying that "[l]*earners from outside the school premises are a threat to the security of the school. This is due to the fact that some of them do take intoxicating substances and become different persons altogether.*" This finding indicates that learners did know what they could do with regard to safety and security at schools.

Inclusion of Learners in the Decision-making Process on Matters Related to Safety and Security at Schools

The question of whether learners were included in the decision-making process was deliberately included to check whether the views of learners were considered in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the question was used to solicit responses that were meant to investigate the way in which schools took decisions on issues related to safety and security. Different responses emerged. Some indicated that they did include learners while others indicated that they did not include learners in the decision-making process. The SGBs in Schools B and D indicated that they did include learners. This was emphasised by the chairperson who indicated that "[w]*e need their ideas. They help us a great deal.*" In Schools A, C and E, the SGBs indicated that learners should be excluded. The vice-chairperson emphasised this by indicating that "[w]*e do exclude them on some of the issues. They are here to learn. As their parents, we know what is good for them. We take decisions and explain to them the decisions taken.*" This response might be a reflection of the way in which SGBs function, where stakeholders who are in positions of authority, such as the principal, dictate the deliberations. This finding is consistent with Nthontho's (2017) assertion that some stakeholders tend to dominate and do not give learners a chance to give their inputs in discussions.

Some RCL members claimed that they were included in the decision-making process, and that decisions were taken through consensus. At School A, RCL members claimed that they were just told what to do. This may be due to cultural factors, where children are not expected to debate issues with older persons. They are given instructions on what to do on certain issues.

The RCL members in School E indicated that they were excluded because other stakeholders only informed them about decisions taken in SGB meetings. The effort to inform learners might be a way of trying to make them think that they are included in the decision-making process.

What is worth noting is the diverse views of the different stakeholders on inclusion of learners in the decision-making process. This could merely reflect the fact that learners are not included in the decision-making process on issues related to safety and security, or it could be due to a lack of understanding of what it means to include learners in the decision-making process.

Discussion

With this study I sought to answer the question on the extent to which the views of learners were included in the development and execution of the SSP. The overall findings suggest that the views of learners were not included in issues related to safety and security in schools. This confirms the findings of studies conducted by Mncube (2008) and Mokoena (2011) who found that learners were excluded from the decision-making process in schools. As Jeruto and Kiprop (2011) argue, schools that include learners do so as a form of tokenism, in that learners are included in issues that are regarded as less important, and they are excluded from other issues because they were regarded as immature, and their inclusion was not valued. However, Gevers and Flisher (2012) maintain that inputs from learners are important when dealing with safety and security interventions at schools as they have an important role to play. It is actually their right to be included in the development and execution of the SSP (Department of Social Development, RSA, 2018; Walton, 2011).

Excluding the views of learners creates a problem in that whatever intervention programme is executed in schools, it is done without learner buy-in. As Chukwu (2008) indicates, exclusion of learners' views leads to insecurity and violent learner behaviour. Consequently, Masitsa (2011) maintains that learners' views should be included in the decision-making process in issues related to safety and security at schools.

The inclusion of learners' views holds certain benefits. According to the SACE (2020), the

benefits include the development of a bond between learners and other stakeholders and sharing responsibility in issues related to safety and security. Schneider (2002) indicates that it also helps to increase and maintain the safety and security of learners.

Emanating from the findings, it should be noted that learners should not be viewed as not being able to contribute positively to issues related to safety and security. From the interviews it was clear that the learners had a clear understanding of the kind of responsibilities that they could have in the decision-making process, other than simply being informed of decisions. This is in line with the findings of Phaswana (2010) who found that learners claimed to know their responsibilities. They also claimed to know which matters were not within their ambit, like issues that affected teachers. Contrary to this claim, Mokoena (2011) found that those in authority often thought that learners did not know much about issues related to safety and security, and consequently they tended to impose what they thought the learners should or should not do.

From the findings, it is apparent that learners are excluded from the decision-making process. This confirms the findings by Mncube (2008), Mokoena (2011) and Nthontho (2017). Their findings indicate that most SGB members were of the view that other stakeholders, such as learners, should not be included when discussing issues that they thought were beyond the learners' competencies. Consequently, learners' views were excluded. I argue that, due to learners' potential, it is important that they are included in the decision-making processes on issues related to safety and security in schools. I further argue that unless stakeholders in authority include the views of learners in the decision-making processes and the development and execution of the SSP, violence will continue unabated.

Conclusion

With this study I established that learners seemed not to be included in the decision-making process in matters related to safety and security at schools. The absence of their voice in decision-making seems to result in decisions that they do not support, which ultimately leads to the continuing violence in schools, irrespective of the different intervention strategies, which have been indicated. As it is an emerging economy, South Africa should be decisively dealing with violence and bullying in schools. This may require innovative and creative ways to deal with the phenomenon where learner inclusion in decision-making should be considered. This may contribute towards the creation of a favourable environment for teaching and learning. As Naude and Meier (2019) indicate, a favourable physical learning environment contributes to optimal learning, which is critical for the development of human resources, as well as quality education, which ultimately contributes to the economic development of the country. It should also be indicated that it seems as though the support that schools got from the DoE and the community on inclusion of learners did not seem to be sufficient. Insufficient support from the DoE might be due to the assumption that regulatory frameworks such as the South African Schools Act should facilitate inclusion of learners in the decision-making process.

Based on the above, I can suggest the following: (1) learners should be included in decision-making processes in matters related to safety and security at schools (inclusion should not be limited to their attending meetings, but it should include their voices being taken into consideration when decisions on safety and security are made), (2) other stakeholders should be trained on the inclusion of learners in decision-making processes at schools, (3) other stakeholders, and parents in particular, should be assisted to understand that even though learners were young, their views could be very helpful in dealing with issues of safety and security at schools, and (4) the DoE and the communities in which the schools are located should assist schools in the inclusion of learners in decision-making processes by encouraging a culture of democratic inclusion, in line with the South African Schools Act and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

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