EXPLORING SCHOOL SAFETY MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES AND INTERVENTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN SOUTH AFRICA

Nthabiseng Mokoena[1], Mathew Kimweli Kimanzi [2]

[1,2] Central University of Technology, South Africa

Corresponding author: mkimanzi@cut.ac.za

Article Info	Abstract
	Secondary schools in South Africa, encounter numerous safety dilemmas, including incidents of harassment and the widespread influence of gang-related conduct. In South Africa, gang-related abuse constitutes a significant societal challenge, affecting over 15% of the population, particularly impacting the youth demographic. Despite acknowledgment of these challenges, gaps exist between the recognition of such safety issues and the execution and efficacy of safety management measures in these settings. This study was conducted to investigate the obstacles and interventions pertaining to the management of safety within the framework of a secondary school in South Africa. The investigation utilized a qualitative methodology within a case study framework, using a sample of 30 participants. These consisted of teachers, the school principal, learners and members of the School Governing Body (SGB). Data was collected through focus group interviews and analysed primarily using thematic analysis. The study found out that factors that were inhibiting school safety were lack of resources, in-effective school safety personnel, lack of adherence to safety protocols and obsolete safety policies and culture. It is recommended that that the formation of a safety policy committee is indispensable for enhancing the school's capacity to document and manage safety incidents.

INTRODUCTION

School safety is a matter of great importance in the realm of education, as secondary schools grapple with a multitude of complex challenges (Kingston *et al* ,2018). School safety management has become crucial due to a range of challenges faced by educational institutions, including increasing rates of violence, bullying, cyber threats, and environmental hazards (Foster ,2020; Greenberg, 2017). One of the primary challenges is the prevalence of violence, both physical and verbal, which not only endangers students and staff but also disrupts the learning environment and affects students' psychological well-being (Kang, 2023). In South Africa, gang-related abuse constitutes a significant societal challenge, affecting over 15% of the population, particularly impacting the youth demographic (Alunga & Maiyo, 2019). Studies conducted globally and in South Africa, revealed concerning trends in safety risks in schools (De Klerk & De Klerk , 2022). Ensuring a safe learning environment in secondary schools is no simple task. School districts grapple with amplified challenges due to factors like high student mobility and overcrowded classrooms (De Waal, 2021). Dube and Hlalele (2018) indicate that the implementation of effective safety measures is crucial for cultivating an environment conducive to learning. However, the practical implementation of safety interventions at the secondary school level remains an area that requires thorough exploration. Interventions and challenges in managing school safety at the secondary level play a crucial role in ensuring a secure environment for students to learn. Scholars like Sari (2023), Rothman et al. (2021) and Rowlings et al. (2020) have delved into this subject matter, identifying key concerns and strategies. For instance, Sari (2023) stresses the importance of implementing comprehensive safety measures for educational welfare specialists within schools, considering their distinct role and characteristics. Rothman et al. (2021) conducted a preliminary investigation on interventions to enhance school safety and came up with measures to curb unsafety conditions. Erçek and Birel (2021) devised a scale to gauge teachers' perceptions of school safety, enabling the examination of the relationship between safety perceptions and various factors. Wang (2022) concentrated on the management of school bus safety, identifying issues, and proposing measures to enhance supervision.

The secondary school setting in South Africa is faced with numerous safety difficulties, encompassing incidents ranging from harassment and damage to the widespread impact of gang-related behaviour (Tadić, 2022). According to Seoka, (2019), safety in South African schools is a pressing concern that affects the well-being and education success of many learners. Many schools face bullying, lack of resources and funding as well as limited community engagements which result in ineffective school security measures (Dankyi et al, 2021). Despite the acknowledgment of these problems, there is a significant lack of understanding regarding the practical execution and efficacy of safety

management interventions in these particular circumstances (Kingston et al, 2018). Moreover, the importance of addressing school safety challenges is underscored by the urgent need for holistic strategies in South Africa, where the complexities of school safety reach beyond conventional worries (Erçek & Birel, 2021). The strain on resources and the potential consequences on classroom dynamics necessitate a focused inquiry to formulate well-informed and effective responses. Given these variables, the goal of this study was to address the critical knowledge gaps by examining the practical aspects of challenges faced in the implementation of school safety management, within the context of a rural school setting in South Africa.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the challenges that are faced in the implementation of safety protocols at a secondary school in South Africa.
2. To recommend strategies that can be used to improve the safety of a secondary school in South Africa.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Effective teaching and learning are enhanced by ensuring that the school environment is safe for both teachers and learners (White & Coetzee, 2015). Safety in schools has been a major concern in South Africa, as reported in various studies and also in the media (Naicker & Stofile, 2018). Teaching and learning cannot take place in an unsafe setting because this setting leads to an unproductive environment. In addition, Hak-bum (2019) argues that the art of creating a peaceful school setting poses great challenges to school management. More so, it is stipulated in section 24 of the Bill of Rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996) that every person has a right to a setting that is not detrimental to his or her health or well-being. The right of every learner to an education and the issue of school safety have received much attention in recent years. According to Netshitangani (2014), denying a learner the chance to receive an education minimise the chance of being successful in life. Qwabe et al (2022) argue that unless a student is able to exercise his or her legal right to an education in a setting that is both safe and secure, the ability to seek an education, particularly a quality education, is fruitless. The goals of education, which can only be accomplished in a safe and secure school setting, are, in accordance with Forster (2020) to create a space for teaching and learning; to prepare individuals for the world of employment, nation-building, and citizenship; to impart social ideals; and for personal growth. According to Lamprechts, (2016), the South

African Constitution and laws provide for the protection of learners' rights and safety in schools. In addition, South Africa is a signatory to the United Nations General Assembly's 1989 adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires nations to enact laws and put policies in place to protect children from all types of violence, abuse, neglect, maltreatment, and exploitation (Greenberg, 2017).

Historically, part of the school safety protocol in dealing with learner gang-related abuse has been to expel learners from the school environment indefinitely (Leoschut & Makota, 2016). The protocol has changed over time to include suspension and educator-based interventions. South African legislation expressly stipulates that schools need to be a supportive environment for learners involved in gang-related issues (Tshatshu, 2016). It is recognised that positive teacher-learner relationships affect more than just academic outcomes. The rationale of this protocol is that excluding the learner from the school environment completely might exacerbate the learner's situation and, learners who are at risk may become more exposed to danger if a familiar environment such as the school does not intervene (Mori et al, 2021). Teachers are in a unique position to intervene when they suspect learners are involved in abuse, as they are often seen as sources of support for learners to approach when they experience problems (Paci-Green et al, 2020). The well-being of teachers may be diminished by the difficulties they encounter, which in turn affects their effectiveness, resulting in reduced ability to aid learners requiring help (Gripp, Jha, & Vaughn, 2020). Teachers working in high-risk communities, where there is a prevalence of gang-related activity, may come across these challenges daily. These challenges provide teachers with valuable insight into the dynamics of the relationships between teachers and learners engaging in gang-related violence (Forster, 2020). In order to uncover the necessary skills and competencies for establishing relationships with such learners, as well as to develop general guidelines to assist other teachers facing similar challenges, it is evident that schools must explore the experiences teachers in their interactions with learners involved in gang-related abuse (Dube & Hlalele, 2018).

A study by Du Plessis & Maestry (2019) revealed that South African learners perceive their schools as unsafe due to coercion and violence by peers or teachers on school grounds. Learners desire the punishment of offenders and greater involvement and accountability of adults to address safety concerns. A whole-school intervention using a critical gender lens is recommended to improve school safety. Across the world, school safety has gained significant attention, and Africa is no different. A concerning trend of rising violence and insecurity in schools across the continent has been documented by research (Alunga & Maiyo, 2019). According to a study by Marishane and Kores (2017) in South Africa, 60% of learners said they had experienced violence at school. In a similar vein, a study by Adewale et al. (2019) in Nigeria found that more than 70% of

adolescents there reported experiencing bullying at school. Alunga & Maiyo (2019) revealed that school violence in Kenya was a strong predictor of learners' dropout rates. Comparing South Africa to other developing nations, Donkor (2017) discovered that in Ghana, learners who lack parents or are raised by single parents in extreme poverty have a tendency to become victims of abuse in their communities. The abuse of learners is triggered by drug abuse and low literacy rates among parents; either parents are absent to safeguard their children, or they lack knowledge on how to handle cases of child abuse at school or in the community. Dankyi et al (2021) argue that a nurturing environment is essential in the upbringing of children. In spite of these concerning patterns, initiatives are in place to enhance school security throughout Africa. For instance, the government of Rwanda has put in place a thorough program for school safety that involves teaching teachers and learners about peacebuilding and conflict resolution (Rubagiza et al, 2016). According to Dankyi et al, (2021), schools with strong ties to the local law enforcement and safety protocols resulted in a considerable decrease in violent incidents in Ghana. Paci-Green et al (2022) suggested that school management should receive support through workshops to enhance their skills in effectively managing stressful situations within the school setting. By establishing professional counselling services within schools and promoting awareness campaigns, all learners, particularly those facing financial difficulties, can benefit greatly (Alunga & Maiyo, 2019). In addition, Du Plessis & Maestry (2019) noted that the partnership between parents and schools proves to be an effective measure in preventing suicide among learners, as it creates an environment conducive to open discussions about the problems faced by the learners. Introducing a strong relationship between schools and clinics, and involving health workers in school governing bodies, can facilitate the early identification and counselling of learners who exhibit suspicious behaviour (Richter *et al.*, 2022).

METHOD(S)

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology. This was utilized due to its potential to facilitate the exploration of diverse perspectives and viewpoints held by the research participants. The qualitative aspect, rooted in an interpretivist framework, explored individuals' subjective experiences with safety interventions and barriers in secondary schools. This phase involved collecting participants' perspectives, emotions, and viewpoints to gain a thorough understanding of their safety issues (Walliman, 2017). A case study research design was applicable in the study as it focused on only one school, in South Africa. This provided an opportunity to carry out a comprehensive examination of the topic from diverse standpoints (Dawson, 2019). In addition, by employing a case

study, the researcher had the opportunity to carry out a comprehensive examination of the topic from diverse standpoints. This analysis comprises not just the viewpoints of the restricted number of participants in each circumstance but also takes into account the outlooks of other groups or individuals, as well as their interactions with one another (Dawson, 2019).

Setting and Participants

The study site is a secondary school in South Africa. The study used a non-probability sampling approach of purposeful sampling. With non-probability sampling, the researcher actively seeks units or participants who might be useful to the study's objectives. Purposive sampling was adopted, as a means of expediting the process of selecting participants who have the capacity to furnish extensive and pertinent information pertaining to school safety management and intervention. This particular method was regarded as appropriate for this study due to the ability to gather information from individuals who possess direct involvement in the subject matter of concern, specifically the analysis of interventions and challenges in the management of school safety at the school (Fielding et al, 2013). A sample of the study was made up thirty participants composed of teachers, one school principal, school governing body members, parents and learners. These were targeted because they are the ones that oversee implementing safety protocols and ensuring that there is safety in the school environment. Teachers were key in providing insights on the classroom experiences that they have with learners who are involved with gang-related violence as well.

Data Collection Method(s) and Analysis

Data collection is the procedure of gathering and measuring information on targeted variables in an established system, which then enables one to answer pertinent questions and evaluate the results thereof (Dawson, 2019). In this study, data was obtained through focus group discussion. There were five focus groups, with six participants in each group that lasted for about 50 minutes. Notes were taken down and audios were recorded. Verbatim transcriptions of the audio recordings were made, and qualitative analytic software NVivo was used to code and theme the data. Thematic analysis was employed as a data analysis approach to identify and explore themes that emerged from the data. The data collection was meticulously categorized and outlined, and various aspects of the research question were interpreted.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of examination of the data gathered from a secondary school in South Africa, with a focus on interventions and difficulties related to managing school safety, are presented below.

Table 1.
Participants' description

Description	No.	Percentage
Teachers	11	36.67
SGB members	6	3.33
Principal	1	10
Parents	6	20
Learners	6	20
TOTAL	**30**	**100%**

Table 1 provides the participants' description based on demographic information. The table shows that 11 teachers, 1 principal, 6 learners, 6 SGB members and 6 parents. The majority are teachers who have experienced challenges and benefits of school safety interventions. The rest of the participants are equally represented to ensure validity and reliability of information.

The findings from the study are discussed according to the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the collected data as below

Theme 1: Challenges in implementation of school's safety

The challenges identified from the study are discussed in the sub-themes below.

Sub-theme 1: In-effective School safety personnel
The effectiveness of school safety personnel is vital in ensuring the safety and well-being of learners, teachers and staff. Hence it is important to assess their effectiveness in ensuring a safe learning environment. The study participants voiced their perspective that

the individuals tasked with ensuring the safety and security of the educational institution, commonly known as the school safety personnel, are not effectively discharging their duties, as evidenced below.

Participant 6: *"Terms of the reference of security personnel stakeholders are not informed about its involvement in safety."*
Participant 9*: "Teachers need more training on crisis management and de-escalation techniques".*
Participant 7: *"Since the safety officer has moved to the other school, the school has been procrastinating to appoint a new officer and getting basic safety up and running again."*

Most of the participants indicated a lack of efficacy regarding school safety personnel. Kang, (2023) discovered that school safety officers who received specialised training in crisis intervention and mental health were more effective in responding to safety concerns. This revealed that the effectiveness of a personnel is not about their presence but about relationships with school community, training and equipment. If safety personnel are equipped with the right training skills and resources, they will ensure a safe learning environment. When the efficacy of school personnel in ensuring safety is insufficient, it can have severe repercussions (Hak-bum, 2019). As such, teachers should support the safety and well-being of learners by fostering a culture of safety and responding to safety protocols (Udali, 2020).

Sub-theme 2: Lack of adherence to safety protocols

The study also found out that teachers and learners exhibit a consistent lack of adherence to safe protocols, thereby putting themselves and others at risk. When asked whether safety protocols are effectively communicated, the following responses were received from the participants.

Participant 8**: *"Students will always try to find more reasons to check why, they should comply up all time".*
Participant 4: "*No, we don't have safety committee that is effective and also learners are ignorant so what is not done every day they forget".*
Participant 25: *"No, because channel of communication of the school is broken, SMT, SGB and other relevant stakeholders does not follow SASA 1996".*
Participant 22: *"No, I have not witnessed anything of that sort".*
Participant 6*: "Yes, learners are gambling, causing noise pollution, using gang-related abuse and littering in the school yard, and they are not being held accountable for their disregarded actions".*

Both groups pf teachers and learners demonstrated a persistent deficiency in adhering to safe procedures, thereby endangering themselves and others. Gripp et al. (2020) argue that, if teachers and learners do not consistently adhere to safety protocols, they have the potential to endanger their own well-being as well as that of others. Teachers play a fundamental role in guaranteeing compliance with safety protocols within educational establishments (De-Waal, 2021). The failure to adhere to safety protocols can result in detrimental psychological welfare among teachers, manifesting as symptoms such as exhaustion, diminished job performance, and loss of motivation (Adewale et al., 2023). It is apparent that there is a lack of effectiveness of the safety committee, as it does not sufficiently implement and enforce the required safety measures. Furthermore, learners seem to be unaware of the everyday actions that they should refrain from, resulting in a recurring pattern of forgetfulness (Gripp, et al., 2020).

The participants also asserted that the transmission of safety protocols to learners and teachers is inadequate. The dissemination of safety protocols to learners, teachers and other staff members lacks effectiveness. This deficiency is evident in multiple research findings. Balida et al. (2022) carried out a study that emphasized the communication of Covid-19 safety protocols to non-native English-speaking learners and teachers in higher education institutions. The study exposed the existence of significant knowledge and awareness of safety protocols among respondents; however, there were still deficiencies in comprehending and adhering to certain protocols. In addition, school premises are devoid of any visible boards or signage that would serve to acquaint them with the permissible and prohibited actions within the school environment.

Sub-theme 3: Obsolete safety policies and culture

Findings from the participants indicated that the school encounters difficulties in implementing safety measures due to lack of resources and obsolescence of its policies. Some of the responses below were received, when asked about the challenges the school faces in implementing safety protocols.

Participant 3: *"Financial challenges. Everything costs money and school already is struggling with school fees, thus there just isn't any more money to spend on safety stuff"*. Participant 14: *"The policies in place are outdated and the management of the school does not take the policies into consideration"*.

Most participants expressed that the school experiences impediments in executing safety measures as a result of the outdated nature of its regulations. According to Lamprechts, (2016) educational institutions encounter numerous obstacles when carrying out safety

protocols. One of the primary challenges is the outdated nature of regulations, which obstructs the efficient execution of safety measures (Kang, 2023; Mori et al., 2021). The level of commitment from both teachers and administrators towards the plan and policies, and how they will enhance student outcomes should also improve to ensure everyone's participation. In addition, Erçek & Birel, (2021) argue that the many hindrances that can be faced in implementing safety measures include lack of funding, support and resources among other reasons.

Theme 2: Strategies that can be used to improve the safety in schools

The following strategies emerged that can be used to improve the safety of schools.

Sub-theme 1: Safety communication

The study found out that safety communication is one of the aspects that can be used to improve safety in schools. Effective safety communication involves raising awareness, sharing of information and ensuring a culture of safety among all stakeholders. It is important for preventing and responding to safety incidents promptly (Kingston et al (2018). The prevailing opinion among the participants was that frequent and regular meetings among stakeholders and morning assemblies with learners can be effective gatherings in which to share information on safety within the school. The act of convening recurring gatherings can be deemed as a successful approach to boost the dissemination of information regarding safety within the educational establishment (Rawlings et al, 2020). Additionally, the morning assembly sessions with learners are deemed as indispensable. The implementation of the new D6 application and the subsequent encouragement for parents to download it are also crucial components. Some of the responses are shown below.

Participant 10: "*Regular meetings – to remind all stakeholders on what needs to be done and how"*.
Participant 6: "Make *sure of posters, flyers and announcements to communicate"*.

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Sub-theme 2: Involvement of community in school's safety

Community involvement is school's safety is important. Most of the participants expressed the belief that enhancing safety at the school can be achieved by establishing a community police forum.
Participant 1: *"They should form community police forum. They should involve all the stakeholders. It should be known."*
Participant 6: "*Community involvement in schools can help increase access to learning opportunities, boost student retention and improve attendance rates of the* learners *at school*".

Most of the individuals involved in the study expressed the conviction that the improvement of safety within educational institutions can be attained through the establishment of a community police forum. The augmentation of safety within schools can be accomplished by engaging the broader community in a variety of ways. One effective approach is the utilization of a community police forum, involving the active engagement of stakeholders such as the local community, the Community Police Forum, the South African Police Services, and the Department of Social Development in the administration of disciplinary matters within educational institutions (Gripp et al., 2020). It is imperative for both the parents and the community to actively contribute their support. Measures should be taken to deter gangsterism and to discourage the idolization of individuals who defy the law, among others.

Sub-theme 3: Use of technological equipment

Additional safety measures will enhance school safety. Adding safety measures close the gaps in tightening safety measures at schools. The respondents concurred that allocating resources to security officers is one of the supplementary safety precautions they wished to observe being enforced in educational institutions, such as the installation of closed-circuit television cameras in classrooms and the presence of a safety officer at the entrance gate.

Participant 5: "*There is need to add CCTVs in classrooms and a security officer who monitors the movements*".
Participant 6: "*Schools can improve security measures by enforcing stringent visitor check-in procedures for scheduled and unscheduled appointments*".
Participant 19: *"We need CCTV monitoring in every classroom and around the school"*
Participants expressed a desire for supplementary safety precautions, such as the allocation of resources towards security personnel and the implementation of closed-circuit television cameras within classrooms Although a moderate degree of security

camera usage surrounding the educational institution is linked to heightened student perceptions of assistance, an increased reliance on security cameras within the premises of the institution is associated with diminished perceptions of safety, fairness, and assistance (Forster, 2020). By adding security measures, the school will be ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment. The implementation of cameras and the presence of patrolling officials, along with regularly and randomly conducting searches, are the foremost safety measures that should be established at schools (White & Coetzee, 2015). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that among learners, there exists no definitive consensus regarding the efficacy of video surveillance cameras in enhancing safety, or regarding the utilization of metal detectors and the presence of additional police and security officers in educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of the study was to investigate the challenges encountered and strategies that can be employed in the management of safety within a secondary school in South Africa. The study findings revealed that the challenges faced by the school in implementing safety measures included in-effective safety personnel, lack of knowledge and adherence to safe protocols, lack of knowledge of safety procedures by the teachers and obsolete policies. Concerning the strategies that can be used to improve the safety of schools, the study found out that it is imperative to communicate issues of safety through regular training and awareness programs as well as involving the community in safety sensitization awareness initiatives. It is recommended that clear guidelines and policies that mandate collaboration between teachers, principals, school boards, and parents in developing and enforcing school safety protocols should be established. There should be a move towards advocating for behavioural changes.

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