Safety in South African schools
by
The Public Servants Association
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South African schools too often fail to deliver the much needed educational support and offer prospects for advancement for our youth. The crisis is deep, with the latest statistic indicating that 78% of grade 4 students cannot read for comprehension.[1] Building a school environment that works for students is a complex task, but amidst the difficult questions such as curriculum or teacher skills development, there are a number of simpler - but vitally important - issues that must be tackled immediately.

Health and safety should be priority. No serious and functional learning environment can be built in a context in which teachers and students feel unsafe. Unsafe teachers are unlikely be able to teach to their full capacity, while unsafe students are unable to learn in a productive manner. This impact on learning belies equally serious issues of human dignity and basic safety. In an extremely violent country, students should at least be able to feel safe at their schools. Schools should serve as a safe place for personal development and cultivation of talent.

Some of the most pressing school safety issues are reflective of broader challenges in society. Schools are affected by crime, including violent crime. The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention estimates that, in 2012, 22% of South African students faced some form of violence at school, with 6.3% facing physical assault.[2] Sexual abuse is one of the most serious challenges facing schools, particularly in a context where there are already entrenched power imbalances. An estimated 4.7% of students, or over 216,000 pupils, have been the victim of sexual assault in schools.[3]

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[1] Chambers, D. "80% of Grade 4s can't read, literacy survey reveals". *TimesLive, 05 December 2017.*
[2] Leoschut, L. 2013. "Snapshot Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study". Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP), Research bulletin No. 5 March 2013.
[3] Ibid

This is quite significant and worrying. Incidents of assault and sexual violence in schools have increased from 2008 to 2012.[4]

These major societal problems are exercabated by other equally worrying factors: bullying, particularly among vulnerable groups such as racial minorities. Bullying crosses the student and teacher divide, and can include school cultures that remain rooted in old disciplinary modes that prioritise strict codes of behaviour that are often intolerant of differences. In other cases, difficult home lives spillover to the school environment, introducing toxic behavior that is rooted in real challenges, and require holistic interventions that help the student outside the school walls.

No doubt, the legislative protection is in place - through the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, the *South African Schools Act*, Regulations for Safety Measures at Public Schools Department of Education Schools Management Manual, and others - but these are not enough to create a safe environment for the type of scared young people who are too often the victims of abuse. Students cannot be expected to operationalise legal protections on their own, the state and teachers must take a leading role. The same applies to the safety of teachers. Broader interventions, such as teaching about abuse or building charters on the rights of students, are good, but limited in their usefulness.

Introducing practical interventions to build a safe school environment is a difficult task, and while some important frameworks have been developed, for example, the National School Safety Framework[5], these should be complemented by more direct structural changes.

First, South African schools increase resources towards and expanding counselling services offered to students. While this is difficult in a very resource-constrained environment, schools should consider cutting back on the teaching of vague and generally unhelpful subjects such as life orientation, and redirect those resources towards having at least one dedicated and capable counsellor, who can assist students on an individual and group basis. While class-level counselling may be helpful, it isn't able to address the kind of personal or sensitive issues that are so often important to students, or to tailor the lessons to the needs of the student.

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[4] Ibid

[5] Makota, G. & Loeschut, L. 2016. " The National School Safety Framework: A framework for preventing violence in South African schools". *African Safety Promotion, Vol. 14, No. 2, December 2016.* http://www.cjcp.org.za/uploads/2/7/8/4/27845461/national_school_safety_framework_makotaleoschut.pdf

Counselling has a number of benefits, including offering vital career advice and assisting in mental health challenges, but in this case, it also creates a closed, safe space that students can use to raise issues of abuse. Implementing such a policy would be tricky, requiring adequately capacitated counsellors, who have both the skills and the support of the administration needed to raises difficult issues against fellow teachers. But introducing such a policy could build the type of environment where so many of the key knowledge and protection systems needed by students can be provided in a nuanced, flexible way.

Second, there is a need to deepen parent and community interaction with schools. This is a pressing issue beyond concerns for safety. An entire generation of South African parents were raised in teaching environments that were designed to disempower them, and as such are not immediately familiar with the very different learning experiences faced by their children. Running dedicated training workshops for parents would aim to equip them with skills to support their children, but would also offer forums through which parent involvement in the school can be improved. Having greater engagement by parents introduces a new set of adults who are outside the power dynamics of the school, and can act as a check on students. More importantly, this would be a powerful support structure for teachers. Developing this bond is good for the learning environment, and may introduce greater oversight in addressing issues of safety, and rooting out problems in the school.

Third, while the importance of teachers must remain paramount, schools should consider limiting the power of a single teacher to change the fate of a student. The power relations of schools are difficult for both students and teachers. For teachers, being a central figure of authority puts immense pressure on them to immediately deliver. While for students, having one figure who has substantial control over your future can be extremely intimidating, and discourage the reporting of abuse. Deepening systems that spread out oversight of students can limit the strain on teachers, and better empower both teachers and students to root out problems. Such systems can include ensuring there are rotating teachers assigned to classes or subjects, having appeal processes for results students feel are unfair, and requiring multiple invigilators for key tests. Embedding the school administration in these process - where principals also play a role in the classroom and in marking - would further deepen the capacity for peer oversight within the school environment, and bring greater assurance that problems will be attended to.