Perspective

The National School Safety Framework: A framework for preventing violence in South African schools

Gillian Makota[1]
Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention

Lezanne Leoschut
Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention

ABSTRACT

Research has highlighted a range of consequences associated with learner victimisation affecting the physical, emotional and academic aspects of learners' lives. These consequences impact learners' performance at school and compromise their ability to desist from criminal and delinquent behaviour. The National School Safety Framework (NSSF) – approved by the Minister of Education in April 2015 - is located within a range of international and national laws and policies that recognise the safety of learners and educators as a prerequisite for quality learning and teaching at school. The framework affirms the commitment to the right of all children in South Africa to be protected from all forms of violence, and in so doing, aims to ensure safe and equitable access to quality education for children as set out in the National Development Plan of South Africa. The NSSF provides an important instrument through which minimum standards for safety at school can be established, implemented and monitored, and for which schools, districts and provinces can be held accountable. The Framework provides a systematic approach to ensuring that each member in the school body plays their role in creating and maintaining safe school environments. This perspective paper outlines the NSSF's approach to preventing school violence.

Keywords: national school safety framework, violence prevention, South African schools, school safety

INTRODUCTION

Schools should be safe places for teaching and learning, free of violence and criminal activity. Unfortunately, crime and violence is a common feature of many South African schools (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). This trend is also observed globally. According to the National Crime Prevention Council (2003), violence is a minor issue for some schools, while for others, it is a daily occurrence. The ubiquitous nature of school violence is evident in the fact that it not only occurs in the school playground and surrounding areas, but recent data suggests that even classrooms are becoming increasingly common sites for violence (United Nations, 2002; Burton & Leoschut, 2013).

Globally, approximately 246 million girls and boys are harassed and abused in and around schools every year (Greene, Robles, Stout & Suvilaakso, 2013). In South Africa specifically, the high levels of violence in schools reflect a complicated combination of past history and recent stresses on individuals, schools, and broader communities (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). In 2012, 22.2% of secondary school learners – which translated to just over a million learners - had experienced threats of violence, assaults, robberies or sexual assaults (including rape) while at school. Female learners bore the brunt of this reported violence. In contrast to popular belief, classrooms emerged as the most frequent site for

[1] Please direct all correspondence to: Ms Gillian Makota, Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, PO Box 44702, Claremont, South Africa; E-mail: gillian@cjcp.org.za

violence occurring in secondary schools; with class and other school mates being identified as the most common perpetrators (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). This data highlighted the need for effective school and classroom management strategies as important measures for improving school safety.

South Africa has achieved remarkable strides in the development of a policy framework that promotes the rights and safety of learners (and educators) in the school environment. International conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC,1989), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, and more recently the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that call for creating safer spaces and the eradication of all forms of violence against children have all been ratified. In line with the regional children's rights mandate, in the year 2000, South Africa ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Viljoen, 2000). Nationally, South Africa's aim to achieve safer schools is documented in the National Development Plan, the National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996), and the Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996). Despite these efforts, violence has continued to plague South African schools.

It is against this backdrop that the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP), in partnership with UNICEF South Africa, and the National Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed the National School Safety Framework (NSSF) (DBE-UNICEF-CJCP, 2015). The NSSF is located within the international, regional and national laws and policies outlined above and recognises the safety of learners and educators as a prerequisite for quality learning at school. The framework provides school management with management tools to effectively formulate, implement and monitor school safety plans.

THE NSSF APPROACH TO VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN SCHOOLS

The NSSF is a wide-ranging approach to addressing violence occurring in schools by focusing on prevention, intervention and response. Overall, the approach emphasises four main building blocks towards achieving a safe and secure learning environment.

The first building block is for schools to be *prepared* to prevent and manage any safety-related problems it may encounter. Preparedness stems from having the necessary codes of conduct, school safety policies and procedures in place, and ensuring that learners and educators are familiar with the content of these safety policies and procedures. These policies should also be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure its continued relevance to the school context and the emerging safety-related concerns.

Secondly, schools should be *aware* of what is happening in their schools by implementing the NSSF-related data collection tools. These data collection tools provide a thorough assessment of the school's current level of functioning with regard to the physical layout of the school buildings and sources of infrastructural vulnerability, administrative and management practices of the school (including disciplinary systems), and the nature and extent of various forms of violence and other safety-related threats occurring at the school. The particular interventions selected to improve school safety (i.e. usually a combination of universal and other interventions more specific to the local school context documented as part of a comprehensive school safety plan) will thus be informed by information gathered directly from learners, educators and other members of the school management and will provide an important baseline against which the success of school safety measures can be monitored and evaluated. Individual, relational, community and societal factors interact to increase the risk for school violence. It is therefore necessary for school safety measures to extend beyond mere policy formulation and learner disciplinary efforts to also include other critical interventions such as teacher training, parental and broader community stakeholder engagement, referring troubled learners to the appropriate counselling and support services, maintaining school buildings and school grounds, conflict resolution skills training for teachers and learners, establishing a school culture intolerant of violence, increasing learner commitment to their schooling, recreational or after-school activities aimed at

fostering personal growth and development, and efforts to continuously monitor and evaluate the safety situation at the school, to name a few.

Thirdly, schools should be ready to *take action* when something happens through the management of safety incidents in line with policies and procedures, responding to early warning signs and promoting a culture of human rights within the school. The NSSF advocates for school safety to become part and parcel of a school's cultural norm rather than being viewed as an add-on to the school management's responsibilities. An important way to do this is to foster both a shared understanding of school violence (i.e. types of violence occurring at school, where it happens, when it happens, most likely victims and perpetrators, early identification etc.) as well as a shared vision for school safety amongst the key stakeholders. This will enable a collaborative effort to building a safe and secure school environment.

Lastly, schools should *take care* to build a caring school by fostering relationships between all members of the school body and developing a network of support to refer learners, both those who experience violence as victims, as well as, those who act violently towards others, to relevant services where necessary. Figure 1 below shows the procedures for implementing the NSSF.

Figure 1: Procedures for implementing the NSSF. Source: National School Safety Manual (2015, p.33)
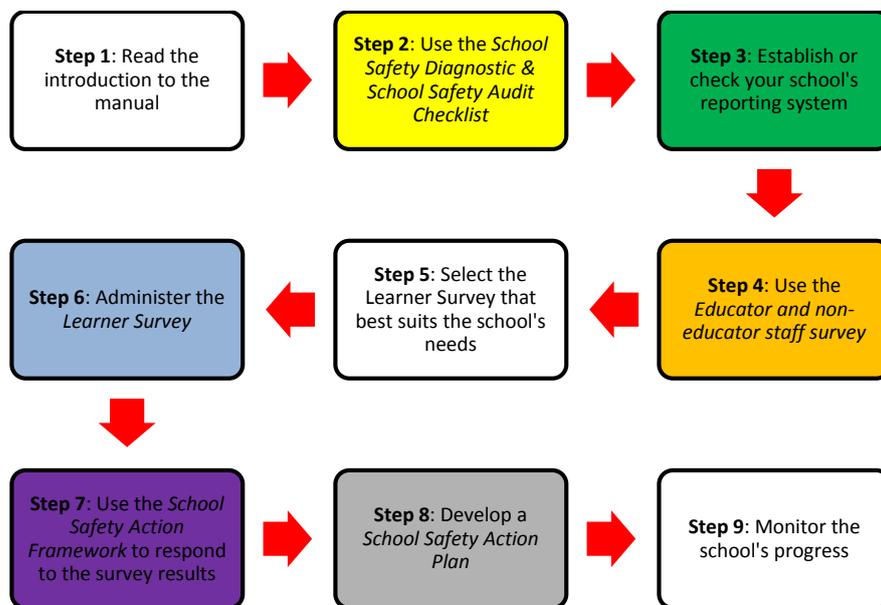
The framework reinforces a whole-school approach to violence prevention and acknowledges that school principals aren't solely responsible for school safety. Given that school violence has deep societal roots, the solution to this problem lies in a collective effort from a range of different stakeholders. A school is made up of several components, such as learners, educators, principals, school management teams (SMTs), school governing bodies (SGBs), and parents or caregivers. Together, these components interact and function within the greater system of the home and community. Only through the collaborative effort of every member of the school system, can safety and violence-related issues be understood, addressed, and ultimately reduced. Although it may be difficult for schools to be completely free of all forms of violence, the whole-school approach allows for the necessary preventative and remedial linkages to be identified and established, and in so doing, provide schools with specific and specialised interventions and support. This ensures that the burden of school safety is shared and incorporated in the day-to-day school activities.

THE MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR SCHOOL SAFETY

The four building blocks of the NSSF culminate in a number of minimum requirements for school safety and nine implementation steps

- Minimum school-level policies should be developed, implemented and enforced

Policies dealing with safety and discipline such as a learner code of conduct, an educator code of conduct, disciplinary procedures and safety policies need to be in place. Learners, educators and other school staff all need to be aware of the content of these policies as well as the consequences if these policies and practices are not adhered to.

- School safety audits are undertaken annually

Schools need to be aware of the issues affecting learner and educator safety and those contributing to the school's vulnerability to violence. These safety audits, also referred to as needs assessments, offer information to school management about what is happening in and around the school and provides invaluable information to inform the design and implementation (and later evaluation) of targeted school safety plans. The safety audits should be conducted annually to ensure the continued relevance of the school's safety plan and its related interventions.

- Safety plans are to be formulated, adopted, submitted and revised annually

Certain actions and measures need to be put in place so as to respond to the safety threats within the school. These actions and measures need to be documented in a written school safety plan that outlines the school's response to the violence-related concerns of the school.

- School safety teams or committees are established and functional

The function of the school safety committee is to develop a comprehensive school safety and violence prevention plan. The committee facilitates the processes of establishing the school's safety needs through the school safety audit, selecting appropriate interventions based on the school needs identified, garnering the support of school, parental and broader community stakeholders for the school safety plan, and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the school safety initiatives. Learners are to be included in the school safety committees.

- Codes of conduct have been formulated and adopted

The development and adoption of codes of conduct for educators and learners are fundamental aspects in the development of a school environment that is characterised by respect, tolerance and cooperation. However, codes of conduct will not in and of itself decrease the levels of violence occurring within schools. These will have effect only when implemented together with other physical and behavioural interventions that specifically target the safety-related threats identified during the safety audits.

- Constant engagement with community structures and forums

The constant engagement with various and key community stakeholders is a prerequisite for a safe school. Schools should work to establish the necessary linkages with professional organisations and government institutions, non-governmental (NGOs), faith-based (FBOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), businesses, law enforcement agencies and care workers to provide a network of support that the school can draw on when responding to violence-related incidents and concerns.

- Reporting and response systems are developed, utilised and reviewed continuously

Schools are encouraged to develop in-school reporting systems that allow for the accurate recording of violent and safety-related incidents occurring at the school. These records also serve as a useful measure

against which to monitor the effectiveness of the school's safety plan in reducing levels of violence in schools.

- Referral systems are established and functional

Schools are expected to establish and maintain a database of local professional service providers including psychologists, local hospitals and clinics, social workers, the police, and alcohol and drug abuse treatment services to ensure the availability of relevant remedial and therapeutic services for learners who may require such intervention following their experiences of violence at school.

LESSONS EMERGING FROM THE INITIAL NSSF IMPLEMENTATION

Since 2014, the CJCP has been working with 40 primary and secondary schools (across four provinces) to implement the NSSF as part of its Sexual violence prevention against girls in South African schools (SeViSSA) project. The monitoring activities that have been carried out to date have revealed important lessons and key considerations for school safety in South Africa. These are described succinctly below.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS SCHOOL SAFETY REALLY?

Although the NSSF emphasises a whole-school or whole-of-society approach to reducing violence in schools, there is a common perception among schools that school safety and violence reduction is largely the responsibility of the police or the Department of Basic Education. This (ill-informed) perception hinders the effective implementation of the NSSF. While having the support of the local police is crucial, police presence in schools cannot replace all the other corrective measures required to reduce school violence such as the necessary safety policies and school disciplinary systems, psycho-social interventions to modify learner behaviour, target hardening approaches, anti-bullying interventions, and fostering a school climate that is intolerant of and responsive to violence. This suggests that, rather than police presence, effective school governance is required to stem the tide of violence in schools.

SECURING THE BUY-IN AND PARTICIPATION OF SCHOOL SAFETY STAKEHOLDERS

The efficient and effective implementation of the NSSF is dependent on the buy-in and active participation of all relevant stakeholders. The school safety stakeholders should not only share a common understanding of school violence and a shared vision for school safety, but should also clearly understand their role in the whole-school approach to preventing school violence. The collective effort to reduce violence will demonstrate the significance of school safety not only to the learners but also the broader community. Securing the participation of all stakeholders is a major challenge that hinders the implementation of the NSSF, however, it is made easier by the presence of existing relationships and networks of support that schools have in place.

GREATER RELIANCE ON PHYSICAL SCHOOL VIOLENCE REDUCTION MEASURES

To respond to the high levels of violence, schools have been found to rely more on physical measures such as increasing police presence in schools, installing burglar bars on school doors and windows, hiring of security guards, and erecting walls and fences when identifying key interventions to include in the school safety plan. Less emphasis is generally placed on non-physical violence reduction measures such as designing and implementing relevant school safety policies and disciplinary procedures, as well as, other interventions aimed at modifying and managing learner behaviour. Although certain visible measures need to be in place for a school to be safe, the physical measures alone will not be sufficient to reduce the levels of violence since it will fail to address the underlying causes of school violence (Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2013). To aid the implementation of the NSSF,

schools need to be provided with much needed support to ensure that the necessary school policy framework is in place to facilitate good governance, effective school management practices, good discipline and a culture conducive to effective teaching and learning (Squelch, 2001).

AFTER-SCHOOL RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES ARE KEY

The NSSF advocates for schools to work jointly with learners to find ways to reduce the levels of violence occurring in the schools. The provision of after-school recreational activities have been found to be a significant way to foster learner participation in school activities. Not only does learner participation in after-school recreational activities serve to foster personal growth and development, build social and life skills, constructively occupy learners, but also facilitates learner identification with the school. According to Donnelly (1987) (as cited in Smith, 2011) when learners identify with their school, they will be more inclined to also identify with and adopt the policies and procedures implemented at the school. In so doing, they will become important role players in reducing violence at schools.

CONCLUSION

The intention of the NSSF is to realise learners' right to learn in an environment that is safe and free of violence. While schools typically mirror the challenges that exist in the family, communities, as well as, broader societies, they can also play a transformative role in addressing violent behaviours and practices. The NSSF is a toolkit that aids schools in becoming environments that are safe and secure. However, change can only be attained through on-going research and evaluation of school safety and violence prevention strategies.

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