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Student leadership: Participation of the representative council of learners in the management of school violence in high school

Abstract

School violence has been on the increase over the past few years, despite several interventions put in place by school management, the Department of Education and parents. Nonetheless, school violence remains a debilitating factor to safe and secure schools. It is within this context that this paper examines the participation of Representative Council of Learners (RCLs) in the management and reduction of school-based violence in high schools and their participation in school governance as stipulated in the South African Schools Act (SASA) Act. No 84 of 1996. Insights for this paper were drawn from twelve participants at two high schools; six participants were selected from each school. Semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection and content analysis employed to analyse collected data for the paper. A purposive case study approach was adopted in the study to achieve the objective of the paper. The core melodies that emerged from the outcomes include that Representative Council of Learners (RCLs) serve as a vital information gathering tool for school managers; Most times the Representative Council of Learners are the first school management arm to intervene in chaotic incidents before school managers arrive and some Representative Council of Learners serve as role models to other learners influencing them positively.

Keywords: *Class, council, learners, management, representative, school violence*

1. Introduction

It is estimated that over half a million people are murdered every year across the globe (Butchart & Mikton, 2014). The South African Police Service crime statistics for 2017/18 revealed that approximately 20336 people are murdered every year in South Africa which also represents an increase in the crime statistics from the previous year. Breetzke (2020) reveals that 56 people are murdered daily in South Africa. The schools are a sub-system of the community and the increase in the rate of school violence in schools could be viewed as a spill over of violence in the community into



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our schools. It is extremely difficult to isolate school-based violence from the high rate of violence in our communities. This is because the schools are part of the community.

2. The objective of the paper

South African Schools Act no. 84 of 1996 (SASA) mandates that secondary schools in South Africa establish representative council of learners (RCLs) in their various schools. SASA stipulates that learners' representatives shall be democratically elected. The representative council of learners are the only legally recognised representative of learners in secondary schools in South Africa, with representative seats in the school governing body (SGB) (SASA, 1996). Bessong, Mashau, and Mulaudzi (2016) maintain that the policy position for the creation of RCLs is to create an all-inclusive management system where all stakeholders in secondary education are fully represented. The RCLs are tasked with maintaining order in schools that would reduce school violence, create good relations and communication amongst management, teachers and learners. Despite the statutory recognition of representative council of learners in South Africa, learners still play an insignificant role in the management of schools, especially concerning school violence in South Africa (Hunt, 2014). It is based on this trajectory that this paper evolved to evaluate the experiences of Representative Council of Learners (RCLs) representatives in school management, to understand their challenges and proffer ways to capacitate the RCLs to be more functional in the management of school violence.

3. Research problem

The concept of school governance ensures the participation of all stakeholders in decision making in high schools as stipulated in the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 (Bessong *et al.*, 2016). The roles of the democratically elected Representative Council of Learners (RCLs) are clearly outlined in the SASA Act 84 of 1996; however, the multifaceted and dynamic nature of school-based violence has made it difficult for them to play a vital role in the management of school-based violence. Mncube and Harber (2013) posit that the participation of learners in school governance is to develop their democratic and leadership skills. Despite interventions by the Department of Education and other stakeholders statistics of school violence continue to increase (Mncube & Harber, 2013). Over the years there has been a steady increase in the amount of school violence globally. This increase has raised great concern on how to reduce and manage school violence in secondary schools in South Africa. It is upon this premise that this paper evolved to explore the experiences of RCLs to identify gaps in learners' capacity to manage school violence and to develop an approach that would capacitate the RCLs to be more proactive in the management of school violence.

4. Policy and legislative framework

The South African Schools Act (SASA) Act No. 84 of 1996 chapter 2 (11) provides the legislative framework for the establishment of RCLs to actively participate in the governance of public schools within South Africa. This paper explores the experiences of RCLs in the management of school violence in two selected high schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The RCLs are democratically elected representatives of learners that are recognised by the law. The roles of RCLs are clearly described in SASA Act No. 84 of 1996. It is important to note that school violence is multifaceted and as such, the interventions of the management should be dynamic. The challenges of creating a school climate that promotes teaching and

learning varies greatly from school to school. This is dependent upon different variables, for example, student discipline, educators' pedagogical content knowledge, their commitment and provisioning of resources. This paper, however, focuses on another important component in high schools, namely the participatory role of RCLs in the management of violence within a dynamic school environment.

5. Literature review

Recently schools are more proactive in developing intervention strategies to curb the menace of school violence in schools globally. Grobler (2018) reported the following incidents of school violence: on 16 November 2018, an educator in Gauteng sustained minor injuries after a learner threw a stone at the educator and in another similar incident on 20 November 2018, a grade 11 learner stabbed a pupil to death in a North West high school. Both incidents occurred in South Africa, highlighting the devastating nature of such violence in high schools. In September 2017, in Modimolle, a pupil was stabbed to death by a fellow pupil, and a Grade 2 boy was found in possession of a gun and ammunition on the school premises. Over the years, issues of school violence have moved from incidents of bullying to more violent circumstances involving dangerous weapons such as swords and guns. The creation of a school climate that promotes tuition and learning remain a shared responsibility of all stakeholders including parents, learners, government, school staff and school managers. It has become imperative for school managers to develop intervention strategies to curb acts of violence in high schools in South Africa.

5.1 The heuristic theory components in the management of school-based violence

This paper takes insights from the heuristic theory model developed by (Astor & Benbenishty, 2018). Astor and Benbenishty (2018) identified school components that could be adopted to develop intervention strategies to reduce school violence and stimulate positive learning attributes. The identified five (5) key components are as follows: class management, class size, learner-teacher affiliation, school management and infrastructure. The above-mentioned components make up the heuristic theory that are school-based variables. They could positively influence school factors that encourage teaching and learning within the school environment. These components shape the school environment that create a school climate that promotes a safe and secure teaching and learning atmosphere, which could bring about desirable academic and social-emotional outcomes in learners (O'Malley *et al.*, 2015).

5.1.1 Classroom management

Heredia (2015) posits that effective classroom management is vital to maximise teaching and learning. Class representatives are elected in each class and grade of secondary education in South Africa. Radebe (2019) maintains that through the application of learners' code of conduct in each class and grade by class representatives, unacceptable behaviours are minimised. The reduction of unacceptable behaviours in class creates a climate that promotes teaching and learning (Radebe, 2019). The implementation process of learners' code of conduct begins with the class representative and could get to the disciplinary committee if not adequately resolved and subsequently to the school management team. The effectiveness of class management is optimised when class representatives ensure that learners are called to order when they deviate from the norms of good behaviour, for example, disrespecting the teacher, by consuming food while teaching is in session (Heredia, 2015).

Cheng (2013) stated that teachers are inadequately prepared to carry out the task of classroom management effectively and efficiently amidst increased administrative demands and alarming unacceptable learners' behavioural issues and as such require the class representative to install some form of discipline such as not allowing playing while teaching and learning is in session. The need for an effective teaching and learning session must be proportionate with a manageable class size. A large class size may lose the required class management by an educator and affect the productivity level of the educator as well as increase teachers' burnout rate. The increased unacceptable and antisocial behaviours by learners have led to increased teacher burnout and remains one of the factors responsible for the increased exit rate from the profession by educators (Inandi & Buyukozkan, 2013).

Cheng (2013) purports that in order to have effective class management, the perspectives of educators' and that of learners should be adequately considered to strike a balance that would promote a school environment that could endorse teaching, learning and knowledge. Classroom administration is an important element of the three-way mix of operative teaching approaches, which comprises expressive content, real teaching strategies and an organisational structure that would support industrious learning. Doyle (2013) revealed that classroom administration epitomises the art of providing an auxiliary and an active teaching and learning environment that encourages speculative enactment. The inability of an educator to effectively manage a class session could stimulate unacceptable behaviours with a teaching session that could lead to school-based violence. Effective class management by teachers could produce a school climate that promotes tuition and learning, and subsequently this leads to better academic performance by learners.

5.1.2 Class size

It has been established that large class sizes hinder progressive learner engagement which enhances teaching and learning, and the smaller the class size the easier it is for the class representative to maintain control of the class during and after lessons (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). A sense of connectedness amongst learners could be easily built through adequate class management which has the potential to increase class connectedness and reduce idle time for unacceptable behaviours in class (Chingos, 2013). This development of positive connectedness where educators and learners could interact could be developed through a small class size. Effective class management could result in productive class interaction and shared knowledge.

5.1.3 Improved learner-teacher relationship

The establishment of the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 was to create a platform within which learners' voice can be heard and more so to participate in school governance through democratically elected RCLs (Duma, 2011). Class representatives communicate vital information that foster improved learner and teacher relationships, including consequences for those that violate the code of conduct of schools. A continuous learner-teacher relationship could have an immense positive outcome when the two parties have mutual respect and at the same time provide the required support for skills development and leadership style (Furrer, Skinner & Pitzer, 2014). The adoption of low stake assessment is designed to provide learners with an opportunity for continuous improvement that is affected by the teacher-learner relationship. This relationship creates a positive or negative perception of the learner towards the assessment (Schut, van Tartwijk, Driessen, van der Vleuten, & Heeneman, 2020). Schut *et al.* (2020) maintain that teacher support assists learners in achieving their goals with a

range of motivational variables. Schut *et al.* further reveal that learners value their relationship with their teachers and would not want to taint the relationship as this would make it more difficult to achieve goals.

5.1.4 School management

Representative Council of learners seat on Schools Governing bodies meeting to deliberate and protect learners interest on issues that may adversely affect them (Duma, 2011). Schools Governing body remains the highest decision-making body in school African schools as stipulated by SASA Act No.84 of 1996, the presence of learners Representatives on the body entails that learners voice are heard and considered in school management decisions means their participation harmonises critical decisions in school management. The trajectory and leadership style of school management influences the attitude of educators and learners in high schools (Joyce, 2015). An effective and efficient school management team could, because of their management style, create a school climate that reduces unacceptable behaviours in schools, thereby promoting tuition and learning. Likewise, an ineffective school management could experience an increase in school-based violence.

5.1.5 Infrastructure

Bradley, Keane and Crawford (2013) argued that the establishment of sporting and recreational amenities in schools for extra-curricular activities would reduce the level of unacceptable behaviours since learners could be constructively engaged by sporting activities during break periods. Class representatives are posted to strategic locations in school during recreational periods to ensure that facilities are not abused and utilised for other juvenile motives like smoking and drinking in the toilets (Duma, 2011). The engagement of learners during break with activities like soccer games would keep the learners busy, two parties are engaged at this point (1) learners engaged with the actual playing session and (2) soccer fans who are watching by the side to keep themselves engaged and to enjoy skilful soccer display. The provision of various extracurricular amenities in schools may not only reduce anti-social activities but also see the emergence of talented sports men and women.

5.1.6 Peer leadership influence

Studies over the years have maintained that youths with like behavioural penchants and similar attitudes over time begin to behave in the same manner (Ashley, 2016). It becomes vivid that friends in the same high school with disruptive behaviour that primes to school violence could act in the same disruptive manner. Whereas those with acceptable behaviour could create a prolonged school environment that promotes teaching and scholarship. Choo and Shek (2013) revealed that peers are a vital socialisation agent for learners. Class representatives with exemplary leadership attributes could influence a learner positively to stimulate academic achievements and reduce antisocial vices. Likewise, peers with unacceptable behaviour may only increase the rate of school violence.

Teerachote *et al.* (2013) reveal that peer leadership has been acknowledged as an effective positive influencing agent amongst young people with similar attributes, which assists in empowering each other for better academic achievement within the school context. The more academic connectedness a learner has in school, the less idle time spent on infertile activities that encourages school-based violence. Peer leadership has been acknowledged as a morale booster for young sports men and women who have surpassed their individual ability as a result of positive peer leadership to win trophies and excel outside the academic environment

(Teerachote *et al.*, 2013). Peer leaders can motivate other learners and shape their behaviours in school to create a school climate that promotes tuition and learning because peer leaders are intrinsically motivated (Tredinnick, Menzies & Van Ryt, 2015). In terms of class control, the optimisation of discipline and class control remain dependent on the behaviour of the class leaders; furthermore, the command climate in the class is a reflection of the extent of leadership display (Segal *et al.*, 2016).

6. Methodology

The study adopted a non-probability purposive sampling technique for data collection. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) state that purposive sampling has to do with careful selection of participants in a study to achieve and gather information directed at a specified phenomenon. Relevant to this study are the selected representatives of the RCLs in both schools. The adoption of a qualitative research approach was a better choice to examine real-life phenomena such as school-based violence to ascertain a better understanding and develop interventions that would help curb the menace, which is school violence in this study (Lune & Berg, 2016).

6.1 Data collection instrument

The study employed semi-structured interviews as a data collection instrument. The adoption of semi-structured interviews provided avenues for the researcher to ask leading questions that led to better comprehension of the phenomenon underpinning the study (Adams, 2015). The study employed a case study research approach as a lens to harness the participants in the study. Content analysis was used in analysing data collected in the study. The interview sessions were recorded with a voice recorder and transcribed before the analysis of the data commenced. Each interview lasted between 15 to 20 minutes; the transcribed data were given to an accredited editor to verify the transcription to reduce the margin of error and to increase the quality of data collected in the study. The researcher ensured that systematic recordings of all data collection processes during the study were documented and carefully stored on external storage and OneDrive for future reference.

6.2 Sample size

A total of twelve participants, consisting of six males and six females from the RCLs of the two high schools made up the sample for this study. The selection of males and females as participants in the study was to create gender equality and avoid gender discrimination. The six participants from each school constituted the following: two class representatives (a male and a female) from each of the following grades, Grade 12; Grade 11 and Grade 10 from each school, respectively representing the Further Education and Training (FET) phase of the high school. The FET phase was selected in the study because they were older and better positioned to understand the role of RCLs in the management of school violence.

7. Ethical considerations

All ethical considerations were observed in collecting data and with interactions with participants. Approvals from relevant authorities were obtained, ethical clearance approval letter reference number HSS/O530/0150 was issued by University of KwaZulu Natal before data collection. Approval was also obtained from Department of Education in KwaZulu-Natal with reference:2/4/8/1/82 before the commencement of data collection. Participants were asked to sign consent letters before the commencement of data collection. Parental consent

was obtained in situations of minors participating in the research. Pseudonyms were adopted to protect the identity of participants in the research. Data for the paper were collected inside the school premises at a convenient time for the participants in the study.

8. Research sites

The study employed two research sites that are high schools in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, named school A and school B. School A is a high school in Imbali; a township established in 1958 and that was used as the research site for the study. Imbali is located 15km West of Pietermaritzburg. The second study site is School B, located in Richmond. Richmond is a town located 38km Southwest of Pietermaritzburg.

9. Discussion

The study adopted the heuristic theory in carrying out this research, evaluating the importance and the relevance of learners' leadership in each of the five (5) components that underpin the heuristic theory. Benbenishty and Astor (2005) identified school components that could be adopted to develop intervention strategies to reduce school violence and stimulate positive learning attributes. The identified five (5) key components are (1) class management, (2) class size, (3) learner-teacher relationship, (4) school management, and (5) infrastructure.

9.1 Management expectations of peer leaders

SASA Act No. 84 of 1996 mandates all high schools in South Africa must have democratically elected leaders who form part of the governance structure of the school representing the students. The United Nations Convention on the right of the child (UNCROC 1989) stipulates that children must participate in discussions of anything that affects them and especially in school matters where they are part of the stakeholders (Bessong *et al.*, 2016). Over time it has become a democratic process for class teachers to institute a process that will see that a learner is elected as a class leader, sometimes referred to as a class representative. The elected learner becomes the mouthpiece of the class as well as the communication link between the learners in that class and the school management. The school management sees the class leaders as part of the management structure to install control and create a school climate that promotes learning and tuition. The class leaders represent a vital tool in school management. Feruzi, a participant in the study, revealed that:

The school management expect what the learners expect from me. What do I mean?
The school management expect me to report what happen in the class to report to them.

School management rely immensely on class leaders for information on the daily happenings in school to be able to keep the system functioning. The notion of learners on key decisions of the management is brought to the attention of the school management by the RCLs. Furthermore the school management evaluates the quality of their decisions based on feedback from the class leaders. Bessong *et al.* (2016) reveal that part of the functions of the RCLs is to serve as liaison and communication mechanism for school management to function effectively. It is based on vital feedback that school managers initiate interventions that will make the school management more effective to stimulate teaching and learning. Likewise, learners expect the class leader to give them all the information from the management, mostly a tip on disciplinary programmes and initiatives designed to identify and reduce unacceptable behaviours in school. Learners also expect class leaders to be on their side when there are

disagreements among learners, educators and school management. The head prefect of one of the study sites John stated that:

The school management want me to take responsibility, isn't it that when things happen in school as a class leader I communicate with learners and give the school management the information.

An efficient and effective class leader would be identified through the level of respect the learners have for school rules and regulations that could translate to the level of control the class leader has over his class. Dhlamini (2016) asserts that poor communication channels could have a devastating effect on school management and as such recommends the utilisation of RCLs to play this vital role. The collective effort of effective and efficient class leadership could produce a school climate that promotes tuition and learning. It could also ease the burnout rate of educators through a reduced anti-social behaviour in school. Learners' leadership in school serves a liaison role in schools communicating between the learners and school management. The flow of information from class leaders helps in reducing school-based violence in high schools in the sense that class leaders assist school management identify perpetrators of school-based violence in high schools. The class leaders also assist school managers identify high risk areas within the school with high indices of violence.

9.2 Expectations of learners from their representative leaders

Class leaders are elected by members of the class who in most instances know one another outside the school premises. The interaction of learners within their communities gives them a better insight regarding whom to elect as a class leader. The community friendship could translate into a stronger bond in school that could foster better relationships. A participant in the study Senzo revealed that:

They expect me to fight their battles and tell the teacher. Helping them to fight. I don't help them to fight but go and report to the teacher.

The relationship that exists between class leaders and other learners show a strong bond of brotherhood to the extent of taking on one another's battle. This feeling of oneness makes it easier for school management to involve the class leaders in the implementation of policies to reduce school-based violence in high schools.

Dhlamini (2016) posits that there are learners who lack moral training and modelling from their parents and as such the need to reshape the moral status of these learners remain important through the leadership qualities of learners' leadership. The exhibition of exemplary attributes by class leaders could have a positive impact on other learners that would reduce school-based violence in high schools. The decision by class leaders not to join forces with learners when there is a problem and instead report to the appropriate authority makes it easier to contain and moderate school-based violence in schools. Nevertheless, the control and management of school-based violence should not be a chain of communication process but an effective unit that can swing into action immediately to remedy the situation before someone is badly injured. One of the participants, as stated below, revealed that learners expect class leaders to provide an instant solution in terms of unrest in school. Musa one of the participants revealed that;

They expect us to stop the fight and expect leadership, normally the class members look up to the class representative to stop the fight. Sometimes we involve the teacher.

It is evident that learners see their class leaders as a problem-solving tool that can be relied upon outside management to provide solutions during emergency and crisis periods in school. The statement above reveals that there is more personal attachment between the class leader and other classmates to the extent of fighting for them that goes beyond a formal relationship. The functions and roles of RCLs are clearly stated in the SASA Act No.84 of 1996 and as such RCLs must function within the framework of the rules and regulations of SASA Act No.84 of 1996 without breaching the law in performing their functions (Bessong *et al.*, 2016). Class leaders are looked upon by other learners to restore law and order in crisis situations. However, the leadership qualities imbibed in the class leaders do not allow them to support unlawful behaviours within and outside of the school premises.

9.3 Training

Training enhances the performance and capability of an individual. The representatives in this study need to perform their duties effectively and efficiently. Nischithaa and Rao Narasimha (2014) postulate that training imparts specific skills to achieve predetermined results. In this instance, the training of class leaders would inculcate school violence management skills that could include non-violent approaches to conflict resolution. The training of class leaders would increase their leadership qualities that improve the school climate and promotes teaching and learning. The right training of class leaders could provide them with the necessary knowledge and skills required to carry out their duties effectively (Nischithaa & Rao Narasimha, 2014). Precious a participant in the study revealed that,

No I did not get any form of training being a class leader. A class leader or representative is chosen as a result of personal attributes.

All participants in the study concurred that the school management do not provide any form of training for class leaders in their school. The absence of training of class leaders by school management limits the capacity of class leaders to perform and contribute effectively to the creation of a school climate that promotes teaching and learning. It is obvious that without the right skills and knowledge the role of class leaders in high school cannot be exploited to capacity by school managers in curtailing the menace of school violence. The class leaders get training from a student forum that liaises with interested teachers and community members for help in the form of training. Nathi one of the participants in the study revealed that:

Not from the school. I have a programme that I run this is a campaign that I call Fundekutle student democratic student organisation. We training people to be future leaders because we seeing this country going down instead of going up. So in the campaign this where we get the training to be leaders, teachers training us on a personal note.

Over the years, the issue of school-based violence has become a global problem with multifaceted dimensions. The hosting of trainings by people who are not professionals in violence management or human resource developers will not add the required value to the learners' leadership. Bessong *et al.* (2016) reveal that the lack of mentorship and direction to comprehend the concepts of leadership and democracy are core challenges facing and limiting RCLs in performing their roles. Combatting school violence require special skills and knowledge, the individual leadership attributes of class leaders is not enough to combat the menace of school-based violence.

School managers should ensure that managing school-based violence is a task that must involve all stakeholders and training of all stakeholders should be an ongoing event to keep

them abreast on how to tackle and manage school-based violence. The training would also be better handled by professionals to equip all stakeholders with the necessary skills and knowledge including trends of school-based violence. The school environment should be a place of learning and ground to groom future leaders, as such the empowerment of class leaders to become future leaders and assist school management in creating a school climate that promotes tuition and learning must be encouraged.

9.4 Perceptions of peer leaders

Emergent data from the study revealed that class leaders at some point in performing their duties attach some level of emotions when it comes to discipline of perpetrators of school violence. They do realise that they are all from the same community and are friends within and outside the school premises. Andiswa a participant in the study stated that;

It varies, right now I feel happy that other learners my peers have faith in me that I can be their leader for 2 times in a row so am happy about that but when it is time for me to take tough decision because we have friends and when friends does something wrong it and it is time for discipline, it is tough but we try not to mix business with pleasure.

Coaching provides a practical method of developing and capacitating young leaders outside the formal organised human development initiative (Jones, 2015). It also provides a learning experience in an informal manner that fosters a cordial relationship between the student and the learner (Jones, 2015). Even though class leaders are happy that they are leaders chosen by the learners themselves, it does not deter them from carrying out their duties when it is due. Class leaders understand the difference between friendship and work as well as the task of maintaining peace and order in school that overrides personal interest.

10. Conclusion

Inclusively, the findings of the study revealed that most class leaders are happy to dispense their duties effectively and efficiently. The core emerging challenge remains that the class leaders do not have any form of structured, appropriate training or development interventions afforded to them. The class leaders' roles and responsibilities are clouded and not delineated to offer any empowerment opportunities. Despite this limitation, the mere fact that class leaders perform functions without formal training, is a testimony of some exceptional leadership skills on their part. This implies that a lot more could be achieved if the class leaders are given formal training, in order to develop their skills, practices and knowledge in the management of school violence in high schools.

The findings of the paper revealed that school management are yet to realise the strategic importance of RCLs' involvement in the management of school violence in high schools. The downplay of the roles of RCLs in school management, especially school violence management, could be responsible for the lack of development and training for RCLs in the management of school violence in high schools in terms of skills development. The empowerment of RCLs with the right skills will enable them to function effectively in their roles as leaders and assist significantly in the management of school-based violence. The development of RCLs with the right skills would also enhance their strategic positioning as role models for their peers in school and within the community. The development and training of RCLs also sets the path for the development and grooming of the next generation of leaders in the community and the country.

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