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Middle leaders pursuing teacher safety against learner victimization: A policy document analysis

Abstract

Various scholars have confirmed that teacher safety against learner victimization is a growing concern worldwide, and this problem is exacerbated by a lack of understanding and readiness to implement policies to address this matter. In this regard, policy implementation by middle leaders (MLs) in creating safe school environments has attracted much less interest as a possible way of addressing issues of teacher safety and the prevention of learner victimization. MLs are regarded as individuals who have the potential to lead, plan, inspire and persuade, and in so doing, they are in an ideal position to translate policy into practice. As such, this paper provides a qualitative policy document analysis of The National School Safety Framework (NSSF) premised on the theory that every individual in the school experiences safety in dissimilar ways and has unique safety needs. The NSSF is endorsed by the Department of Basic Education to guide in addressing issues of violence and safety in South African schools. Underpinned by the rational choice theory and utilizing policy document analysis, texts in the NSSF were analysed and interpreted to propose transformative policy strategies that can assist MLs in managing teachers' safety at schools more effectively. The findings suggest that administrative duties and a lack of time make it difficult for MLs to create a safe and supportive learning environment in schools. Another finding was that there is no clear plan outlined in the NSSF to guide MLs to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. To assist MLs, this paper proposes transformative policy strategies that can assist them in promoting teacher safety and preventing learner victimization in schools. The paper recommends that more explicit interpretation and implementation strategies be communicated with schools to assist them in fighting the war against violence in schools.

Keywords: education policy, learner victimization; middle leaders; policy document analysis, teacher safety

1. Introduction

Teacher safety in educational settings implies that teachers need to experience harmony, discipline, care, emotional and professional peace, and mutual respect (Nikitas, Wang & Knamiller, 2019). However, schools have become hostile learning environments that undermines teachers' position of power, thus inhibiting them from using their influence and

fulfilling their duty to provide learners with compassionate monitoring (Mpindo & Mphojane, 2024). Notably, learner victimization has become a focal point in terms of teachers' safety at schools because teachers are frequently exposed to physical and verbal attacks, and continued abuse by learners in and outside their classrooms (Venketsamy, Baxen & Hu, 2023). While learner victimization against teachers contributes to psychological, social and emotional trauma, it also influences how learners engage with others, resulting in detrimental implications for their learning and development (UNICEF, 2019). We argue that the ongoing debate regarding teacher safety against learner victimization is necessary to build stronger awareness and disciplinary collaboration between teachers and learners. Additionally, we believe that addressing these issues may contribute to balancing teachers' enthusiasm and passion for teaching with that of the pedagogical needs and fundamental rights of all learners.

Middle leaders (MLs) in schools are in an ideal position to exercise their leadership in the space between the classroom and whole-school strategic leadership to address the issue of teacher safety against learner victimization. MLs (individuals such as deputy principals and departmental heads) provide a channel of professional and pedagogical investment between teachers, learners and parents in schools (Branson, Franken & Penney, 2016), and are accountable for building healthy conditions for effective teaching and learning (Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford & Lamanna, 2023). The indication "building healthy conditions" (Lipscombe *et al.*, 2023) has a direct relation to being accountable for ensuring that schools are safe spaces for teaching and learning. In this regard, a key responsibility of MLs is to bring policies to life so that conditions in schools can change (Gear & Sood, 2021). When relating to the safety of teachers and addressing learner victimization, MLs play an important role in changing lives through their ability to support, influence, and manage violence in schools (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2019).

Violence in schools encompasses actions that transpire within the school setting and can be demarcated as any behaviour of teachers, parents, visitors, school leaders or non-academic staff members who attempt to cause harm to individuals or to damage school property (Venketsamy, 2024). A quantitative study by Dirzyte *et al.* (2024) aimed to study the connections between different forms of victimization against learners, colleagues and parents, and teachers' life satisfaction in Lithuanian schools. The findings of their study reveal that teachers' safety was mainly threatened by social and verbal abuse, offenses against private property, and physical and cyber victimization. The authors (Dirzyte *et al.*, 2024) indicate that teacher safety against victimization should get urgent attention and action from a policy perspective as well as from the involvement of leadership in schools. Having used a learner-to-teacher bullying questionnaire, Woudstra *et al.* (2018) investigated the phenomenon of learner-to-teacher bullying as a potential factor influencing teachers' mental health. The findings revealed that verbal bullying, physical bullying, indirect bullying and cyberbullying are the main forms of victimization of teachers by learners. The authors (Woudstra *et al.*, 2018) recommend that action must be taken by leadership to protect teachers so that their mental health can be improved and their enthusiasm for the profession be restored. Given these studies, policies can be used effectively to curb violence in schools (Dirzyte *et al.*, 2024), while action should be taken to strengthen school leaders' ability to address school violence (Dirzyte *et al.*, 2024; Woudstra *et al.*, 2018). In this paper, we intend to look at teacher safety against learner victimization from a policy perspective, because it is necessary to "promote the rights and safety of all learners and teachers" (DBE, 2021: 1).

Years ago, the OECD (2004) reviewed policies and practices on school safety and described international trends in school safety. The review finds that there should be a heightened form of awareness regarding safety in schools, requiring innovative leadership to implement policy strategies to address violence in schools. An interesting observation concerning school safety policies in the United Kingdom is that an individual (a staff member) must be appointed to ensure that schools meet their health and safety duties (UK Department of Education, 2022). On the home front, the National School Safety Framework (NSSF) regards safety in schools as a serious matter and as an apex priority and has instituted policies to ensure the safety of all learners, teachers, and relevant stakeholders (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2016). Section 12 of the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996a) states that everyone has the right not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman, or degrading way. The National Education Policy Act (RSA, 1996a) prohibits the administering of corporal punishment and, in 2021, the South African Council of Educators (SACE) introduced a handbook that contains possible ways of addressing discipline in schools (RSA, 2021). The NSSF (RSA, 2016) provides guidance to increase the capabilities and skills to ensure that leaders in schools work towards a safer school environment. Despite the existence of school safety policies, a worldwide problem is that safety policies are not understood well and are mostly implemented when serious instances of violence occur (Masekela, Ngobeni & Sepeng, 2024).

The significance of this paper is emphasized by the notion that a thorough understanding and subsequent implementation of policy in education are possible (Mason, 2016) and, when a policy's intentions are communicated, change in schools is possible (Le Mottee & Kelly, 2017). Notably, policies are important, because they assist schools in establishing ideal operating practices and create models of quality for safety and learning, and accountability (Sami Ulla, 2018). In this paper, the significance of policy analysis can be found in the thought that

policies influence how safe individuals are in school. To create this environment, guidelines need to be developed and reinstated that establish safety standards for the physical environment and mental state of learners and teachers (Sami Ulla, 2018: 1).

Additionally, policies contain necessary options that, when analysed thoroughly (De Klerk, 2014), can guide MLs on what actions can be taken to address teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. MLs should, therefore, also be supported on how to embrace innovative notions of leadership enactment (Kavanagh, Sexton & Fitzsimons, 2021) to contribute to safer school environments.

As such, this conceptual paper aimed to explore (a) information relevant to middle leaders' role in ensuring teacher safety in schools, (b) how an analysis of texts in the NSSF (RSA, 2016) can contribute to the empowerment of MLs to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization in school, (c) propose transformative policy strategies that can assist MLs to provide leadership regarding teachers' safety in school more effectively. Notably, an analysis of texts in the NSSF (RSA, 2016) can further assist MLs in understanding the nature and scope of school violence, understanding their roles and responsibilities, understanding the risks of violence in schools, guiding them on what actions to take against violence, and to evaluate, reflect and improve actions (RSA, 2021) of teacher safety against learner victimization in schools.

The significance of our research findings is echoed in the words of Gurr and Drysdale (2013), articulated as MLs showing their potential to have a significant impact on school and learner improvement. We argue that our research findings can contribute to an understanding and organizational support, professional preparation and leadership development, and the possibilities for the development of middle leadership practices. We hope that policymakers at school level will be inspired to use our proposed transformative policy strategies to equip MLs with knowledge on how to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization in schools.

2. Understanding the practice of middle leadership

Middle leadership,

[i]s not just between the senior managers of the school and those who teach in the classrooms, but they are an integral part of both, and they have to relate to different members of the school community in different ways depending on the context and the situation. They work in the complexities of a sort of relational and structural sandwich, without even considering the broader relations with students, parents, and the community (Grootenboer, 2018: 7).

This view (Grootenboer, 2018) implies that MLs function in a space between teachers and principals in schools' leadership structures, and therefore hold responsibilities that move beyond those of a teacher and are less than that of a principal. In this regard, MLs not only contribute to the quality of teaching and learning, but they also have a moral obligation to ensure the well-being of everyone in the school. In this regard, MLs contribute to fostering acceptable morals and professional trust (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer & Ronnerman, 2016), whilst taking responsibility for the implementation of required policies in an ethical manner (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2023). Additionally, MLs ensure a safe, caring and organized learning atmosphere by recognizing and leveraging teachers with capabilities in behaviour management (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2023). Considering these perspectives (Grootenboer, 2018; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2023), we understand the practice of middle leadership as the enactment of capabilities that may contribute to them providing sustained pathways for the overall improvement of safety in schools.

Our understanding is confirmed by the notion that MLs' work is associated with school efficacy in terms of their ability to influence educational practices like teaching and learning and ensuring that schools are safe and ethical institutions (Lipscombe et al., 2023). These practices (Lipscombe et al., 2023) imply that MLs can pursue leadership for school safety from an ethical lens, thus strengthening non-violent school environments (see Malone, 2020). The enactment of middle leadership to ensure safe school environments is not an easy task. Notably, middle leadership can become a difficult leadership task because MLs are not always familiar with how to interpret school policies, thus contributing to a sense of uncertainty about how to play an effective role (De Nobile, 2018). In alignment with this paper, we argue that an analysis of education policy text may assist with furthering an understanding of the practice of middle leadership, particularly regarding teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. Drawing on Iftach and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2023), the relevance of our argument is supported by the notion that new information regarding MLs' practices from a policy perspective may open the potential for new understanding regarding the work they do; that is, lead with an ethics of care to ensure teacher safety against learner victimization in schools.

3. Policy indicators to support middle leaders

Farwell (2024) notes that MLs play a key position in establishing a safe and disciplined learning environment in schools. This includes establishing strong expectations for learner behaviour, guiding teachers in implementing efficient classroom management approaches and administering safety procedures. To ensure overall safety in schools, education policy indicators can be used to guide MLs on what to do. Significantly, education policy can be regarded as

the implicit or explicit specific action of courses of purposive action being followed, or to be followed in dealing with a recognized problem or matter of concern and directed towards the accomplishment of some intended or desired set of goals. A policy can also be thought of as a position or stance developed in response to a problem or issue of conflict and directed towards a particular objective (Harman, 1984: 13).

Interpreting Harman (1984), education policy studies should be concerned with the practical application of policy decisions and shed new light on important debates within the field. This is precisely the intention of this paper; that is, that new light is shed regarding directives that can assist MLs in pursuing teacher safety against learner victimization in school. Significantly, educational policy is an insightful compilation of ideas and strategies for improving a situation within schools (De Klerk, 2014).

Basset (2016) reports that the New Zealand Ministry of Education policy guidelines determine that MLs should be able to manage organizational and managerial practices that support a controlled and safe school setting. However, New Zealand MLs' role is overwhelming, and they are not always thoroughly prepared to fulfil this role; therefore, they must be provided with support and training to build their leadership capabilities (Basset, 2016). In the South African context, the South African Council of Educators (SACE) has launched a handbook on safety and security for teachers aimed at providing teachers with access to their rights and responsibilities and dealing with issues relating to violence in schools (RSA, 2021). According to SACE, teachers should be supported to perform their daily roles and responsibilities without fear and intimidation from others within the school community (RSA, 2021). The same document (RSA, 2021: 24) advises that a new approach to ensuring teachers' safety can be done through "Leadership, policies, implementation, capacity building, support & reporting". MLs are part of leadership structures in schools and can, therefore, act as agents who promote an encouraging and safe atmosphere for all teachers and learners.

However, policy indicators are sometimes not implemented effectively because some policy actors are typically much less interested in policy enactment in the wider school setting as their concerns are driven by their lack of knowledge and experience regarding policy matters (Cloete, 2018). Drawing on this view (Cloete, 2018), we believe that the importance of policy indicators for policy enactment is important, therefore, it is significant to enlighten MLs on how to use policy indicators to address issues of teacher safety against learner victimization in schools.

4. Transformative policy strategies for teacher safety

Our intention was not to suggest similar strategies or ideas already in the public domain, but to propose transformative directives to empower MLs to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization from an education policy perspective. Jansen (2016) defines transformative directives as a group of policy alternatives that will motivate action and intervention

strategies and help shift public perceptions about teacher safety in schools. Congruent to this view (Jansen, 2016), we contend that transformative policy strategies can be seen as important markers of the application of leadership by MLs, because such directives highlight their advanced leadership skills and demonstrate their willingness to act against learner victimization within the context of their employment. Additionally, we believe that transformative policy directions for MLs can enhance their learning and help them put concepts and tactics into practice as they work to ensure teacher safety in the face of learner victimization in classrooms. Our views align with those of Mertens, Holmes and Harris (2009), who posit that the advancement of social justice and human rights are the “fundamental principles of the transformative axiological assumption” (p. 470) that guide transformative directives. Thus, at the level of policy enactment, MLs can be in a position to make sense of, answer to, and enact a continuous stream of transformative strategies to ensure teacher safety against learner victimization in schools.

In this paper, transformative policy strategies will be deduced from an analysis of texts in the NSSF (RSA, 2016). The NSSF aims to combine current school safety and violence prevention strategies and provides the thread that connects them all. A significant feature of this policy is that it draws on the connection between violence and other environmental influences relating to caring and safe schools by placing the school within its larger community (RSA, 2016). We argue that interpreting texts from the NSSF is not only a matter of understanding it as the statements of policymakers. Instead, our goal is to analyse texts in the NSSF to propose transformative policy strategies that can guide MLs on how to protect teachers from victimization in schools.

5. Rational choice theory

Until recently, the main method for conceptualizing human activity in the social sciences was the rational choice approach, which focuses on a select few factors that influence individual actors' social behaviour choices. Traditional conceptions of choice assume that the decision-maker is a *homo economicus*; that is, the individual is rational (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016). *Homo economicus* denotes autonomous individuals who use rational choice to emerge as an entrepreneur of the self to become a particular kind of person (Hamann, 2009). In our view, MLs who are truly entrepreneurial must display the ability to flourish in turbulent times and have a passionate disposition to drive their school ventures. Consequently, entrepreneurs should seek enterprises that support educational goals, which they can do by fostering a variety of stakeholders' abilities, skills, and mindsets in terms of educational goals-oriented metrics and approaches, both inside and outside of the school. Given this, the entrepreneurial ML should also manage internal and external disturbances and allocate resources inside the school to ensure the smooth running of its operations (Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz & Pashardis, 2022). Thus, in making rational decisions in schools, all choices provided to MLs must be similar and have transitive favourite relationships for the decision-maker to be able to rank them and consistently select the solution that maximizes utility (Kruis et al., 2020). The rationality defined by the rational choice theory adopts a more specific and narrower definition, which simply means that individuals like MLs can build safe and trusting relationships during interactions in schools (Friedman, 1953).

Capturing the crux of rational choice theory, Elster (1989) states that when people are faced with multiple options; they often choose those they think will yield the best overall result. In this paper, our analysis of texts in the NSSF was geared toward equipping MLs with policy

options that can assist them in how to respond to teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. Given the conglomeration of learners and learning diversity in multicultural school settings, it requires that MLs develop and employ higher-level leadership skills, which may significantly enhance the quality of their instruction and leadership (Gabriel & Matthews, 2011). Enacting their leadership in the middle layer of a school's hierarchy, it is frequently undistinguishable how much real autonomy or authority MLs have to make leadership decisions or influence policy. In the context of this research, the rational choice theory is used to explore how MLs can be equipped with the knowledge to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization in school through an analysis of texts in NSSF (RSA, 2016).

6. Research design

We used a conceptual research design (CRD) which is largely referred to as research related to ideas and concepts about a phenomenon under study to solve real-world problems (Hirschheim, 2008). In policy studies, an application of CRD may assist researchers in analysing policy content, enabling them to excavate possible policy solutions to address particular issues (Farrell & Coburn, 2016). A CRD was useful because it enabled us to search for innovative ideas in the NSSF, aimed to guide MLs on how to think innovatively about pursuing teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. Additionally, a CRD was useful to "bridge existing theories in interesting ways, link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking" (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015: 128). In so doing, we believe that knowledge about teacher safety "can no longer be perceived, described, expressed, characterized, classified and known in the same way" (Foucault, 1973: 217). Drawing on Foucault (1973), we believe that a CRD supported us in rejecting ultimate truths about teacher safety in schools, whilst identifying potential policy options that could address issues of teacher safety against learner victimization in schools.

7. Research method: policy document analysis

In this paper, we employed policy document analysis (PDA) as the research method because we relied on "documentary data rather than data collected from human subjects" (Cardno, 2018: 626). Notably, PDA requires a dedicated understanding of documents (Kayesa & Shung-King, 2021) and in this paper, we engaged in a thorough reading of the NSSF (RSA, 2016).

Before analysing texts in the NSSF (RSA, 2016), we scrutinized the website of the South African Department of Basic Education to familiarize ourselves with the policy documents that have a reference to school safety. We found three policies that aim to prevent learners from engaging in illegal activities in schools. These policies apply to all public schools in South Africa; therefore, it was useful to consult the three education policies. Firstly, regarding the Regulations for Safety Measures at all Public Schools (RSA, 2006), all public schools have been declared drug-free and dangerous weapon-free zones to address matters of learner violence. Secondly, the National Strategy for the Prevention and Management of Alcohol and Drug Use among learners in schools (RSA, 2013), aims to prevent drug abuse in schools so that they (schools) can be safe places of learning. Thirdly, the NSSF (RSA, 2016) aims to prevent, manage, and respond to safety matters to create safe and supportive learning settings in schools. The NSSF (RSA, 2016) specifically speaks to the need for the development of teachers, school management teams, learners, and principals' skills in promoting school safety effectively. We scrutinized the texts in the three policies and found that the NSSF (RSA, 2016) contains the strongest views regarding teacher safety in schools.

We extracted texts from the NSSF (RSA, 2016) and transferred the information to a Word document. We drew on the works of John (2024) to apply qualitative content analysis to code the extracted texts from the NSSF (RSA, 2016). We extracted meaningful data with strong links to teacher safety against learner victimization. We organized and categorized the texts to form a knowledge base about the phenomenon under study. Next, we applied parsing to break texts into smaller parts. These parts were paragraphs, words and sentences aiming to understand the structure of texts. We then made use of data cleansing, implying that we removed irrelevant information, thus ensuring the reliability and accuracy of the extracted data. We checked for inconsistencies that occurred during the initial phase of data extraction and made the necessary adjustments to ensure that the most relevant information regarding teacher safety against learner victimization was selected. Subsequently, the following themes emerged: roles of middle leaders in promoting teacher safety, expectations to advance teacher safety, and strategies for promoting teacher safety and addressing learner victimization. Before the analysis commenced, we sent the extracted data, codes and themes to academics from two South African universities that specialize in education policy studies. We did this to ensure that we reduce any forms of bias. Those academics scrutinized the process to confirm if the extracted data, coding process and themes were in order. The two academics were satisfied and recommended that we could continue with the process of analysis.

8. Analysis of texts in the national school safety framework

We conducted a PDA and proposed transformative policy strategies to equip MLs with knowledge on how to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization in schools.

8.1 Roles of middle leaders in promoting teacher safety

This theme and subsequent analysis align with the first objective of this paper, which was to explore information relevant to MLs' role in ensuring teacher safety in schools. Aligned with the literature study conducted in this paper, MLs have a role to play in working with and through others by translating policies into action so that unfavourable situations in schools can be changed (Bassett, 2016). In this regard, the NSSF is clear that MLs should "express a readiness to implement the policy" (RSA, 2016: 4) and play a role in "engaging teachers and non-academic staff members in identifying, responding to, and evaluating interventions aimed at improving school safety" (RSA, 2016: 4). A readiness to, and a willingness to engage others in implementing education policies (like the NSSF, RSA, 2016) imply that MLs should have intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to implement the policy in an attempt to improve safety in schools. According to Ball (2003), individuals will experience intrinsic motivation when they experience satisfaction from performing activities that motivate them to act. To experience strong intrinsic motivation, MLs can be involved in the formulation of safety plans as a way to respond to safety threats within schools (RSA, 2016). Also, individuals will experience extrinsic motivation when they are motivated to achieve particular goals (Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, the NSSF (RSA, 2016) is silent on what schools can do to keep MLs motivated, resulting in the notion that "the desired outcome of a safer school for all is unlikely to be achieved" (p. 27). The indication of "unlikely to be achieved" (RSA, 2016: 27) is worsened by the huge volume of administrative work and a lack of time (RSA, 2016: 57) to implement the policy. This further complicates the work for MLs to follow policy guidelines in creating a safe and supportive learning environment and pursuing teacher safety against learner victimization in schools.

This analysis aligns with the first objective of this paper, which was to explore information relevant to MLs' role in ensuring teacher safety in schools. Although the NSSF advocates that MLs can be intrinsically motivated to play a strong role in the formulation of safety plans, their work is challenged by administrative matters and a lack of time to implement the policy. The implication is that, although the NSSF gives guidance, there are no clear directives as to what MLs should do to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization. Another implication is that policymakers should provide clearer guidelines as to how MLs can ensure teacher safety against learner victimization which may allow opportunities for the enactment of transformative leadership activities to improve school safety in general.

8.2 Expectations for the advancement of teacher safety

To curtail the issue of teachers being unsafe in the presence of learners, the expectation is that teachers should be informed on how to confront and defuse potential violence in schools (Mahome, Mphahlele & Khashane, 2023). In this regard, the NSSF only makes provision for one expectation relevant to the advancement of safety in schools, which is that individuals should be empowered with "skills to meet expected standards of behaviour" (RSA, 2016: 25). Interpreting this text, the expectation is that MLs should equip teachers with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values so that they (teachers) would know what to do when their safety is jeopardized. This expectation aligns with the rational choice theory in that individuals [MLs] should foster mindsets and skills that will enhance their ability to ensure safety in schools (see Hamann, 2009). Notably, this expectation in the NSSF is aligned with other safety regulations, yet it "does not provide detailed guidelines in terms of how to implement the policies" (RSA, 2016: 32). The absence of a clear plan hinders MLs from pursuing teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. The implication is that MLs may find it difficult to initiate improvement in terms of teacher safety. In this regard, Mendenhall, Gomez and Varni (2018) purport that the difficulty in addressing tensions (like teacher safety) is contrary to global trends regarding the role of leadership and innovation. Global trends imply that individuals (like MLs) need to be equipped with professional development strategies so that they can enact ethics of care in terms of teachers' safety in schools (Mendenhall et al., 2018).

8.3 Strategies for promoting teacher safety and addressing learner victimization

In terms of analysis of texts in the NSSF (RSA, 2016), it became clear that administrative duties and a lack of time make it difficult for MLs to create a safe and supportive learning environment in schools. Also, there is no clear plan outlined in the NSSF to guide MLs to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. Considering these findings, the NSSF advocates assistance to schools in identifying and responding to safety threats in schools (RSA, 2016: 20). However, the identification and response to issues of safety (also teacher safety) has become an administrative process, and clear leadership strategies are not visible in the NSSF (RSA, 2016).

Drawing on texts in the NSSF, we propose the ESR, as transformative policy strategies, to assist MLs in addressing the issue of teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. The ESR represents establishing an inclusive culture (E), signalling violence (S), and reviving a restorative approach (R) which is explained in more detail below.

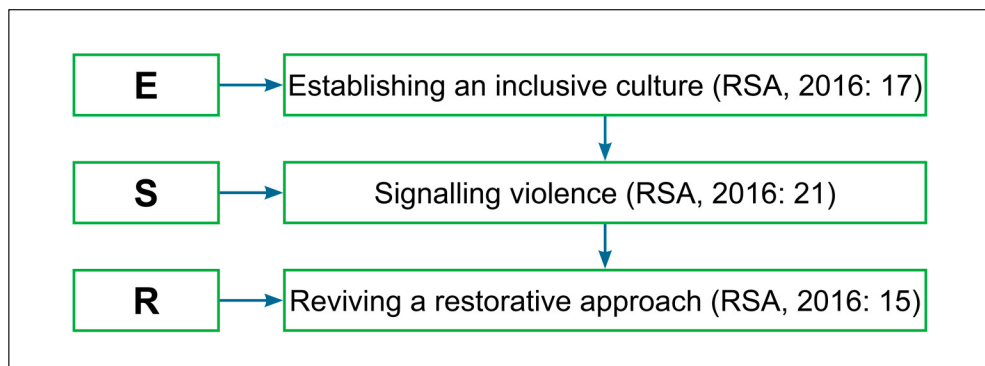


Figure 1: ESR: Transformative policy strategies for MLs

Source: Own construction

The creation of an inclusive culture (RSA, 2016a) should be an orientation of leadership that fosters involvement rather than manipulation by MLs. In this regard, a seminal thought of Dewey (1916: 9) indicates that an inclusive culture in schools should be regarded as the “very process of living together educates”. As such, the establishment of an inclusive culture should, therefore, be seen as a social function, implying that learners and teachers should be taught to have the same understanding and like-mindedness of safety and non-violence in schools (Broom, 2015). In today’s ever-changing world, MLs should employ leadership to discover and develop new attitudes toward safety to help learners and teachers cultivate a way of thinking and acting where every individual would feel valued, accepted, and safe (Dewey, 1938). The philosophical implication is that MLs should be cognizant that an inclusive environment for teacher safety against learner victimization should be geared towards the promotion of interaction, and participation (Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938; Broom, 2015). Thus, in considering the discovery, development and promotion of safety in schools, the legal implications would be that MLs train teachers and learners on what it means to “promote a safe and healthy environment” (RSA, 1996a, Chapter 7: Section 152(d)). The implication is that MLs should thus be reasonable when establishing an inclusive culture because the pursuit of teacher safety against learner victimization should be directed at training, controlling and monitoring learners and teachers’ behaviours.

Signalling violence implies that MLs should take a protective and supportive stance to ensure the well-being of learners (and teachers) is aligned with positive emotions, learners’ educational needs, and professional flourishing (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). MLs should thus be ready to connect teachers and learners with a sense of purpose, self-acceptance and personal growth, whilst cultivating resilience on an ongoing basis, even in challenging circumstances (Simula, 2021). The philosophical implication of signalling violence is that MLs should cultivate awareness against violence, while simultaneously nurturing reasoned choice to act well, bearing in mind that the ability to act well must be habituated by practice (Perdomo, 2021). This suggests that MLs should train teachers and learners that thoughts and actions about teacher safety against learner victimization should be tested and practiced daily so that safety routines can become an institutional reality. The legal implication is that

MLs should ensure that they “lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people’s talents and capabilities” (RSA, 1966b, Preamble). Such talents and capabilities should be aligned with the determination to reduce and act so that teachers can be protected against learner victimization in schools (WHO, 2019).

Finnis (2022) views a restorative approach as a way of being, and an underlying ethos, which assists individuals to maintain and build strong relationships. It thus provides a solid framework within which learners and teachers can work together to promote a whole-school ethos instituted on the value of relationships. This means that MLs should train teachers to model what they teach because learners are observant individuals. In this regard, Finnis (2022: n.p.) observes that “often, they will model their behaviour after your behaviour, albeit subconsciously”. MLs should, therefore, leverage learner and teacher leadership programmes that will train and empower them in restorative practices and interpersonal climate building. We, therefore, hold the view that MLs should draw on formerly recognized values and relationships to provide both motivation and safety for learners who cause harm and guidance to teachers who experience violence in schools. The philosophical implication is that MLs should guide individuals in schools that restorative practices encompass the notion that learners who caused harm to teachers should be given opportunities to recognize the impact of their behaviour, understand their obligation to take responsibility for their actions and take steps towards making things right (Reyneke, 2011). The legal implication is that MLs should disrupt the taken-for-granted notions of safety by working vigorously to ensure that teachers are “free from all forms of violence” (RSA, 1996a: Section 12(c)) and learner victimization in schools.

9. Limitations

The current study has limitations to be addressed by future research. First, this study used a policy document for analysis. Other measures, such as observations, teacher reports and experiences would have provided an additional evaluation of the interpersonal climate within schools. There is also a potential limitation stemming from the fact that MLs may have valuable insights into teacher victimization in schools.

10. Conclusion

This conceptual paper aimed to explore how an analysis of texts in the NSSF can contribute to the empowerment of MLs to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. We argued that the significance of an analysis of education policy texts is founded on the philosophy that policies contain options that, when communicated, can contribute to improved situations in schools.

Learners’ actions of victimization and violence against teachers have become a stronger buzzword in academic spaces and an issue of more serious concern in the education realm. Firstly, learner victimization and violence against teachers contribute to emotional challenges, contributing to an increase in school violence and an exodus of teachers from the profession. Secondly, despite prior research on the phenomenon under study, academic scholars have raised voices for a new look at teacher safety against learner victimization, especially from a policy point of view. We therefore argue that an understanding of texts in the NSSF may contribute to the empowerment of MLs to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization in schools.

Having analysed texts in the NSSF, we found that administrative duties and a lack of time make it difficult for MLs to create a safe and supportive learning environment in schools. Another finding was that there is no clear plan outlined in the NSSF to guide MLs to pursue teacher safety against learner victimization in schools. As such, we propose three transformative policy strategies to assist MLs in pursuing teacher safety against victimization in schools. In this regard, we introduce the ESR, which consists of directives such as establishing an inclusive culture, signalling violence, and reviving a restorative approach. Firstly, MLs should employ leadership to learn about and foster fresh attitudes toward safety to help learners and teachers create spaces where everyone is valued, accepted, and safe. Secondly, MLs should promote knowledge about violence, while instantaneously nurturing reasoned choices to act in appropriate ways. Thirdly, MLs should strengthen new ways of values and relationships to ensure ongoing motivation and safety in schools.

Given the proposed strategies, we recommend that policy frameworks be strengthened by the inclusion of interpretation and implementation strategies that will equip individuals (MLs) better on how to address learner victimization, whilst working toward a safer school environment for teachers. We also recommend that MLs should be more involved in developing plans to deal with teacher and learner safety, thus strengthening collaboration amongst all stakeholders in schools. Also of significance is the strengthening of MLs' motivation and readiness to implement school safety strategies so that they can be in a position to create a safe and nurturing school environment. We believe that when policies are more explicit regarding leadership against violence in schools, MLs will be in a stronger position to promote teacher safety and prevent learner victimization in schools.

Based on the findings and discussion in this paper, we believe that issues such as interpretations of policy readiness, innovative policy implementation plans, and an exploration of legislative imperatives for policy leadership enactment can be regarded as interesting avenues for future research.

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