

Learner Truancy In South African Township Public High Schools: A Management Perspective

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Abstract

The study investigated the management strategies that school principals employed to curb the incidents of learner truancy in South African township public schools. Learner truancy boil down to effective teaching and learning. In this study, the researchers argue that school principals should use effective management strategies that will instil a sense of discipline and respect for time management and a collaborative effort by parents as well. An interpretive qualitative research method was used in this study to elicit rich contextual data of school principals' management strategies of learner truancy in their respectful schools. A convenience sample of 13 school principals in one district of education in South Africa was sampled. The study used in-depth interviews strategies to collect data that enhanced and shed light on management strategies used by township school principals. It took two months for the researchers three months period to interview and collate the data. Qualitative data collected was transcribed from the recordings and thematically analysed. The study results revealed that their school policies in place for learner late coming and they are being used in schools. However, the study also showed that disciplinary practices are inconsistent with the actual policies. It was further revealed that school principals persist to violate school policies and school education legislation.

Key words: management; truancy; learner school truancy; learner school policies.

1. Introduction and background

Learner school truancy is a direct disruption on the effective running of any school. School principals and teachers spent valuable teaching time guarding the school gates to ensure that learners who are late for the school do not infringe on the rights of the learners who are on time. Equally, indispensable time is spent on disciplining, punishing learners, calling parents, and counselling learners instead of teaching and learning (Maile & Olomoyo, 2017). Learners who are allowed inside the classroom long after the school have started lose valuable time on learning, resulting in an overall poor academic performance of the school.

Learner school truancy coming is a widespread problem in many public schools in South Africa (Pretorius, 2014). In terms of education legislation, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (hereafter, SASA) requires that School Governing Bodies (SGBs), in consultation with learners, parents and teachers to draft and adopt a code of conduct for learners for effective teaching and learning (section 8(1) SASA). The aim of a code of conduct for learners is aimed at establishing a disciplined and purposeful school environment and maintenance of the quality of learning (section 8(2) SASA). Behaviour of learners that is not consistent with an agreed upon code of conduct for learners could be seen as a negative reaction to the school establishment that

brings along disorderliness and anarchy (Mohapi, 2014). Once the code of conduct for learners is adopted nothing exempts a learner from complying with it (section 8(4) SASA). Continuous and consistent learner late coming to school might imply a level of ill-discipline on the part of learners that might lead to disastrous consequences on their future learning prospects. On the same breadth, section 8(5) (b) stipulates that a code of conduct for learners should establish the necessary support structures or counselling structures for learners who undergo disciplinary procedures.

Despite these legislative provisions' observations of learner school truancy show that the trend towards learner truancy has increased. The school principals have reacted in different ways with different management strategies to curb scourge of learner truancy. (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011; Weideman, Goga, Lopez, Mayet, Macun and Barry 2007). Punitive measures such as closing of the school gates, sending learners back home and others have been argued by the Equal Education Law Centre as a violation of the rights of learners to the right to education (section 29 of the Constitution, RSA) (Equal Education Law Centre 2012). Likewise, the closing of the school gates on late comers is further contested as a direct violation of section 3 of SASA which refers to compulsory school attendance. In terms of section 3(1) of SASA, every parent must take the responsibility for every learner under his/her supervision to attend a school from the first school day of the year in which such learner reaches the age of seven. This must continue until the last school day of the year in which such learner reaches 15 years or the ninth grade, whichever occurs first.

Coetzee and Venter (2016) and Mouton, Louw and Strydom (2013) assert that the relevant school legislation seems to have a stern posture towards a person or persons who intend to prevent learners from accessing education. Section 6(a) of SASA

stipulates that any parent who, without just cause and after a written notice from the Head of the Department, fails to comply with section 3(1) is guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a fine or imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months. Moreover, section 6(b) states that anyone who, without just cause, prevents the school attendance of a learner who is subject to compulsory attendance is guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a fine or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months. Based on this inference of the law, preventing learners by closing the school gates or sending learners back home might be construed as a violation of the relevant act. Additionally, section 24 (a) of the Constitution (RSA) implies that everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being. The fact that learners on certain days are locked outside the school premises or sent home might have a bearing on their safety and well-being. Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya (2014), Van Breda, 2014 and Maphosa and Mammen (2011) point that South Africa is known to be rife with gangsterism, lack of safety, high levels of drug abuse and teenage pregnancy levels which might pose a threat to the livelihood and safety of learners - especially while being outside school gates or roaming the streets because the school is unable to accommodate them (Khuluse 2009).

2. Conceptualisation of learner school truancy

Learner school truancy can be defined as an unauthorised whole day absence from a school without authorisation or partial absence from the school without authorisation (Boshego 2012). Sibiyi, Gamede and Uleanya (2019), Boshego, (2012) citing Duckworth and de Jung (1986), point out that schools use instruments such as school registers, class registers, subject registers, and computer software programmes to monitor attendance and recording absenteeism and late coming to be effective. As such, learner school

truancy could be directly linked to section 3 of SASA that refers to school attendance. The Department of Basic Education refers to learners' school truancy as an unauthorised unless there is a reasonable and acceptable explanation for the late coming (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016). If the school starting time is 07:30, learners who arrive later than the stipulated time are said to be partially absent from the school. This might then result into an unauthorised absence. Jaram, Yoyo, Botha and Govindasamy (2011) observed that most of the learners' late coming was owing to several factors, such as transport being late, walking a long distance to school and learners who were poorly performing at school. Likewise, during rainy periods and the winter season, it has been observed that learners increasingly arrive late for the school (Raymond & Lesego, 2017; Weideman, Goga, Lopez, Mayet, Macun and Barry 2007). Weather conditions might not be the only reason for late coming. Others include the upbringing of learners in their homes and that parents fail to teach their children the value of time. Some learners who are within a reasonable walking distance from the school are often still late.

3. Research question

The study sought to address the following research question: What are the management strategies used by the school principals to address learner truancy at secondary schools in the North-West Province?

Method

A qualitative research study of secondary schools in one district of education in the North-West Province was applied (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner 2008; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2004). A qualitative purposive sample of six school principals (three males and three females) were recruited from the initial 14 principals for qualitative personal interviews (Uys and

Puttergill 2005). A total of 12 learner school policies were also analysed as a sample to inquire into the truancy measures of schools. Ethical measures in the study included permission to conduct the research was sought from the North-West Department of Education and from the school principals. The research participants completed an informed consent form and the purpose of the study was explained to them.

Results

From the study became evident that learner school late coming was a concern for the participant school principals. Furthermore, the school principals, as custodians of teaching and learning, seemed to agree that there is a need to align their learner school policies with SASA. The first question sought to establish whether there was a learner policy on school truancy or not. The following were responses from the school principals.

4.1 Learner truancy policy

This section of the data analysis is a response of school principals in relation to whether they have a policy in place in their schools. The responses emanated from a question as to whether there was a learner school truancy policy at the school. The response from the school principals was that was a majority response. School principals confirmed that they had a learner late-school late coming policy in place. The response from strongly agree to agree showed that an overwhelming affirmation response. This response was similar to the subsequent response based on whether learners at the school were aware of the learner school policy on school late coming. A response of agree to strongly was an indication that learners at the schools were indeed familiar with the truancy policy at the school. However, it should be noted that there were school principals who responded that at their schools they were not sure whether learners were familiar with the learner

late-school coming policy. The responses of the school principals were matched with the contents of the learner school policies. Five school policies were evaluated, and the results were that it was only stated that learners are expected not to be late for the starting time for the school. The policies were not explicit enough to elaborate on management measures to be taken against learners who are late for the school. Furthermore, the policies did not state the rights of learners in relation to various sections of the Constitution and the school legislation.

4.2 Parents are aware of the policy

The responses that are now discussed were based on the response from the school principals as to whether the parents were aware of the learner school truancy policy. The responses of the school principals indicated that they were sure whether parents were aware of the learner-late coming policy. According to the SASA as a legislation, parents as a majority component in the SGB should know and be aware of all school policies pertaining to the well-being of their children. The response of the school principals pertaining to whether teachers at the school were aware of the learner-late school policy showed that most of the school principals were not confident enough that teachers in their schools were aware of the learner policy. One of the school principals was asked during the interview as to the extent to which parents are aware of the school policy on learner school late coming. Her response was as follows:

“Parents are aware of the learner school policy. However, it seems that they do not read it or just sign or agrees with it without really make sure it works. Some learners do not stay far away from the school, but they still come late for the school; their parents do not say anything. This is the problem that we are faced with at this school with parents.”

Again, the responses emanated was a response from school principals how frequently the school learner truancy policy was used. The response of the school principals was positive in the sense that they indicated that the policy was frequently to more frequently used. On the one hand, there were school principals who indicated the policy was less frequently used, which meant that there was inconsistency in the way the policy was being used. If the policy is not effectively used at the school, it would not create a sense of justice and fairness to learners at the school.

4.3 Learners are sent back home

This response might not be based on the school policy rather on the spontaneous prompt and frustration by teachers and school principals at the school. Close analysis of the 12 learner school truancy policies does not recommend that learners be sent back home when they are late for the school. The action of sending learners back might be construed as a direct violation of the school policy as well as the school legislation (SASA (section 3 (1)) and the Constitution (section 28 and section 29).

4.4 The gates are closed

The nature on how learners' late coming to school are handled represents the responses of the school principals in relation to the management strategies they employed to deter learners from entering the school premises when they are late. Most school principals showed that their school policies do not include closing the school gates when learners are late. However, there were a small percentage of school principals who indicated that they do close the school gates when learners are late. Against this background, it could be inferred that closing the school gates or sending learners home might create an unsafe environment for the learners. This view is corroborated by Mncube and Harber (2013) by

stating that South African schools are affected by direct and indirect incidents of violence. It could argue that school principals who close the school gates down or send learners home for late coming might be found guilty of exposing learners to an unsafe environment as well as the legislative provisions of the right to education.

4.5 Learners get counselling

This section of the findings reports on the how principals normally counsel late comers at their schools, though a small percentage of the school principals indicated that they did not offer learners any sort of counselling at their school. The effort of the school principals together with their management teams should be applauded for trying to remedy the problem by using corrective measures. Retributive measures such as punishment by locking the school gates or sending the learners back home show not to have the desired effect in the long-term as the behaviour is likely to recur. A male school principal said the following in relation to the importance of learner counselling:

“Learner counselling seems to be more effective when the learner is not directly blamed. My experience tells me that when the learner is shown the consequences of his/her behaviour he/she is likely to come to his senses. Some of the learners seem not to be aware of their consequences of their behaviour as lateness is their way of life. For example, some of the late comers they stay within the proximity of the school, but they wait until the bell rings and it is then they come rushing to the school. This is a show of high level of lack of self-discipline”.

4.6 Parents are called

A large percentage of school principals indicated that they are likely to call parents to the school when learners are continuously late for the school. Although this is a good indication of a good relationship between the school and the parents,

there were a slight percentage of school principals indicating that they are against the idea of calling school principals to the school. One of the female school principals, when interviewed, responded by saying:

“Parents do not really take the responsibility; in fact, it looks like they are also having trouble to instil discipline on their children. It looks like there is perception from the parents that the school has solutions for the problems of the children. Parents are the primary teachers of their children and they must show that.”

The involvement of the parents who are always late for the school is consistent with the school policies that were reviewed. However, there are contextual factors that were noted by the school principals that some parents are migrant labourers and they are not always available to attend to the school meetings. The extended families of learners also seemed not to be helpful in assisting with the discipline of the learners.

4.7 Reasons for being late

Most of the school principals believed that learners do not always provide valid reasons for being late for the school. The perception is that learners might be late for the school owing to ill-discipline and disregard of the school policies. It was not surprising that school principals viewed the reasons of learners for being late for the school as unacceptable and not being valid. One of the male school principals reported the following:

“There is a pattern that one is able to follow; the system that we are using at the school is able to show a consistency of learners who are always late for the school. As a result, there is no doubt that one reason can make the learner week-in week-out.”

The school starting time was thought to be a problem. For example, in winter many schools start at 7:50 and in summer at 7:30. However, the

changing of seasons and time seem not play an important role in curbing learner truancy in schools.

The responses of the school principals indicate that learners are more likely to be late at the school, therefore, disrupting the normal teaching and learning routine. The school must put more resources to manage the activities of the learners who are truant. From the literature review, Jaram, Yoyo, Botha and Govindasamy (2011) warn that despite the good intentions of the school principals to accommodate factors that lead to learner truancy, some factors such as transport being late, walking a long distance to school cannot be avoided. This implies that effective learning and teaching is likely to be affected negatively during the first and second periods of the learning programme. The responses of the school principals show that learners who are temporarily absent from the class owing to late coming suffer quality tuition time.

4. Conclusion

These research results showed that the school principals value learner school policies for school late coming, but that there is no consistency in the application of such policies. Likewise, the study indicated that despite living in a human rights era, where the rights of learners are said to be paramount, violation of the rights of the learners is still rampant. This was revealed by the actions of the school principals and some members of the school governing body by closing the school gates or sending learners back home. It must also be noted some school principals are trying to use corrective measures by counselling learners to understand the consequences of their undesirable behaviour. Parents as primary educators of their children showed, according to the school principals, they are not seriously playing their roles in ensuring that learners are at school on time.

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