

Amy Sarah Padayachee

## A Silent Revolution is Unfolding and the Weapon is Collaborative Leadership

### Abstract

The preponderance of literature associated with school violence illuminates the severity of its manifestation in schools both nationally and internationally. The impact of school violence on students' physical and emotional well-being cannot be understated as this is commensurate with student academic achievement. The South African Government's National Development Plan 2030 identifies the improvement of the quality of public services as critical to achieving transformation. It is germane to then consider how an education system entrenched in a long-standing history of violence can be adopted in an agenda of transformation. In his 2023 State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa stated: "Schools must be safe and allow for effective learning and teaching". Behind this pronouncement, is a silent revolution unfolding. South African schools, now nearly three decades into democracy, are focusing on collaborative leadership to contribute meaningfully to the redress of violence in school environments and move toward trauma-informed practices. A study comprising 121 schools in South Africa reveals that school management teams are employing collaborative leadership to address such behaviours. Underpinned by the Collaborative Leadership Theory, this mixed methods research design investigates how collaborative leadership is employed by educational practitioners to address school violence in 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms. The results of this study have the potential to offer an approach towards addressing school violence in South African schools, despite the complexities of an education system stemming from a violent past which remains evident in South African classrooms today.

Keywords: collaboration, collaborative leadership, leadership, management, transformation, violence

### Introduction

The paradigm shift in educational management involving the devolution of the management of South African schools has caused many changes in South Africa's educational landscape, with school violence increasingly becoming a contentious issue for education practitioners and policymakers alike. According to Tangwe (2022), in the sub-Saharan African context, respect for human rights, which shows an inclusive environment void of violence, is more often the exception than the rule. Mkancu (2019) describes schools as a microcosm of the heteronormative and patriarchal society in which they exist. Studies and media reports portraying violent and indiscipline incidents in South African schools reveal that violence is increasing at an alarming rate and requires urgent attention (Burton & Leoschut, 2013), however, school violence is not peculiar to

the South African school context. As concerning as the rate of escalation, is the impact of violence on children. Literature suggests that around 10-20% of children globally experience mental health problems and depression, one of the leading causes of illness and disability among children (Chen, Pan & Wang, 2021). There is a growing recognition that although the capacity for aggression is innate and universal, aggressive behavior typically occurs in response to threats that the self perceives in relation to internal and/or external interpersonal experiences (Cohen, 2021).

School, in particular, serves as a primary context for social-emotional and behavioral adjustment, and adolescents spend an increasing amount of time in school-related activities (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Regrettably, indiscipline in South African schools stems from more significant societal issues unaccounted for by legislation and policy frameworks. Moreover, violence is such a prevalent issue in South Africa that Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) contend that crime and violence in South Africa are a way of life, and schools are not immune to the violence from the community. The post-1996 dispensation should have brought reform and overall improvement in all spheres of the education sector. However, the reality is that South African schools are crippled by school violence now more than ever.

A study by Padayachee and Gcelu (2019) revealed that school management teams (SMTs) employ collaborative leadership strategies to manage school violence in secondary schools. Collaborative strategies refer to established and implemented processes by all school stakeholders. Furthermore, it is essential to note that stakeholders involved in some form of collaboration must have a degree of autonomy rather than a generalised merging of stakeholders' efforts. Despite the plethora of information surrounding school violence, there still exists flaws, loopholes, and gaps in the literature that lead to considering how these highly commended strategies can be used to gain maximum effectiveness. It is argued that the defects in school management are catalysts for current issues pertaining to school violence. The focus of this study is the discourse around the management of school violence by employing collaborative leadership strategies.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study is grounded in the Collaborative Leadership Theory. The theory was first introduced in the United States by Kurt Lewin (1947) where he applied the cooperative system in a scientific method on nutrition. According to Miller and Miller (2007), researchers Chrislip and Larson (1994) explored the principles of collaborative leadership using observation-based studies and found many benefits of collaborative leadership in organizations such as schools. Collaborative leadership as the theoretical framework for this study, exemplifies characteristics that are consistent with school management and leadership. Research shows that functional schools effectively employ collaborative leadership, whereby educators and managers work collaboratively with each other, and in teams. It is upon this premise that collaborative leadership served as the foundation of this study. Chrislip and Larson (1994) researched the principles most used and applied by collaborative leaders. Their findings revealed that collaborative leaders were decidedly visionary, but this vision focused on how people can work together constructively, rather than about a particular vision or solution for a specific issue (Miller & Miller, 2007).

## Method

A mixed method approach was chosen to capture the widest range of effects of collaboration efforts, (the so what of reform efforts together with a range of participants' perspectives of how and why various reforms were attempted) (Stringfield & Yakimowski-Srebniak, 2005). The researcher chose to use an explanatory sequential design since the design is deeply rooted in the pragmatic paradigm and that the mixed methods research approach was compatible with pragmatism. The sampling frame included all SMT members from 121 secondary schools, amounting to 605 SMT members. The researcher used 20% of the sample frame to calculate the number of schools in the sample size. The sample size comprised 24 secondary schools in a South African education district, from which four participants per school were selected, amounting to 96 participants. Participants selected included the principal, one deputy principal and two departmental heads per school. These participants were selected utilising simple random sampling. The data collected from the questionnaires in the quantitative strand were presented using descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviation, and percentages. The second strand of the data collection procedure involved the use of a qualitative approach. In the second phase, qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to provide 'thick descriptions' of the research questions and to provide further explanations of the results that were obtained in the first phase, in greater detail.

## Results

The statistics reveal that 50.6% of participants *strongly agreed* whilst 41.4% *agreed* that as SMT members, discipline was a collaborative effort rather than a delegated duty. The cumulative total of responses in agreement to this question was 92%. Despite agreement from such a large percentage of participants, 6.9% of participants chose the *disagree* option whilst an outlier was found in the *strongly disagree* option. According to Dhlamini (2016), the Department of Education (DoE) has put in place the vision through the National Development Plan and the Department of Basic Education (DBE)'s Action Plan 2014 which has reiterated the government's position declaring education a societal issue. The DBE has called for partnerships with the community to address challenges facing education in the country (Department of Basic Education, 2012). If SMT members do not take into account that discipline and school violence need to be addressed collaboratively, the problem is unlikely to be lessened when approached as a delegated task.

Instead of one or two people making decisions alone, teams make decisions by consensus after all participants have voiced their opinions and support for the change. Shared leadership requires an operational structure that allows more people to lead the thinking of the school and to participate in making decisions at all levels. It is therefore necessary that school management teams encourage a working relationship between more stakeholders. Despite the many benefits that collaboration can have on the management of school violence, the statistics for this question reveal that 13.8% of participants *disagreed* whilst 2.3% *strongly disagreed* that such relationships existed. The 2.3% strong disagreement appeared as outliers in the data set. However, it is worth noting that a total of 83.9% of participants were in agreement that such relationships were displayed, and involved in shared thinking, shared planning and shared creation of integrated instruction.

## **Don't wait for the government to change things, form partnerships to address issues such as school violence**

Participants lamented the government's lack of support in managing school violence. Participants also stated there were many ways to incorporate assistance from external stakeholders. They further pointed out that aid for school violence management was available, but school management teams must be willing to accept the assistance. One participant, a deputy principal, spoke of the collaboration, saying:

*Partners for Possibility is an organisation that SMTs in our area work with, and it is phenomenal. It has nothing to do with the education department whatsoever. It's actually just a mindset shift in the teachers and principals, and bringing in new ways of learning, inviting other NGOs to help the kids and impact the kids' lives. The SMTs are trained as teachers, and now they are playing a full-on management role, and if you look at that scenario, it isn't easy. The kids themselves come with massive social challenges. Teachers aren't equipped to deal with that. Bad leadership makes them an island on their own, or they form these clusters of the ones that are dynamic, and then they rub off on each other, and they actually work together, and I think that's powerful. And don't wait for the government to change it. So, I think for a lot of us, it's that support an outside person who is entirely unrelated to our scenarios who rubs off ideas and give us encouragement and put together a vision plan for our schools. It's like there are probably many other ways of curbing the problem of violence this but now we've got partners we can work with to actually obtain some of these dreams to work within the school. I really think it's built on the most unrelated relationships and cross the border of private business and government because they bring skills and bring corporate backing, and they bring outside people; so, it's like this bridge-building space between private and public.*

The participant's response is indicative of successful collaboration as presented. The above excerpt shows that the school had an SMT geared toward finding solutions and thereby managing school violence. The inclusion of partnerships is intended to provide encouragement, support, and assistance in a vision for the school. The SMT of this school, therefore, demonstrated collaborative leadership qualities. According to Woods et al. (2006), sustainability should be a key indicator of the success of school collaboration. Their findings revealed several conditions, such as a clear strategy for the partnership, a robust organizational structure including sufficient staff to support the activity, and both flexibility and reflexivity to adapt to shifting circumstances and new developments.

## **Ill-discipline leading to school violence must be approached holistically and practically**

Concerning the theme presented above, the participants stated that policies aside, school violence must be approached holistically and practically. As mentioned, the participants saw policies guiding discipline management as static documents. Hence, they alluded to adapting and personalising the disciplined approach. Another participant, a departmental head, stated:

*I'm not sure whether its leadership, I'm not sure whether it's lack of support, I'm not sure whether it's a combination of both, I'm not sure if it's the perspective of the individual of what's important that contributes to this decline; but there is a steady decline of our schools. For discipline to be holistic and to be practical, each school must govern itself for itself. See, the department will give you a policy. You don't have to follow*

*it; make it personal. Run the school if it were your family what you would do to build the ethos, to build the culture of learning and teaching, aside from what another school is doing and get the support needed. There's no support in the hierarchy.*

The key implication in the above response is that schools should approach discipline as a family effort, a collaborative one in which the needs of learners are addressed. The participant's view of how school violence should be approached is supported by the proponents of collaboration, Chrislip and Larson (1994), who state that collaborative leadership operates under the premise that, if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic vision and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organisation or community.

## Discussion

The role of SMT in policy management is as vital as the role of the principal in such matters. The study revealed that the principal, as the chief executive officer, can lead collaborative efforts to manage school violence through collaborative leadership skills. Van Wyk and Marumoloa (2012) opine that the functioning and roles of school management teams with regard to policy matters can, to a degree, also be derived from the core duties of the principal as and senior member of the SMT. Anderson-Butcher et al. (2008) assert that all that is required is one collaborative leader (who does not necessarily need to be the principal) to convene a collaborative team to focus on the improvement needs of the school. Participants also mentioned that the key to collaboration was shifting the thinking of managing school violence as an individual delegated duty to that of a partnership between stakeholders. SMT members provided practical examples of how leading by example helped to show stakeholders that the school belonged to them and that if they worked as partners, they would be able to achieve much.

The participants asserted that the SMT needed to display transparency in their management approach and collaboratively lead all stakeholders to form partnerships that can help manage school violence. DeWitt (2016) contends that collaborative leadership requires commitment and dedication and that collaborative leaders need to be transparent, honest, trustworthy, compassionate, and responsible to build concrete working relationships. In collaboratively leading stakeholders towards sustaining discipline, DeWitt (2016) suggests that collaborative leaders should allow others to have a voice in all decision making, allow for a shared vision, and foster partnerships for learning. Leithwood and Louis (2012) assert that collective leadership is the extent of influence that organizational members and stakeholders exert on decisions in their schools. Participants further stated that when the SMT leads by example, all stakeholders buy-in to the cultivation of a safe school environment. A positive school climate is achieved through a collaborative approach between learners, educators and members of the community working together and planning school improvements, identifying what works best, and what the current needs of the school are.

Participants mentioned a range of non-governmental organisations and external stakeholders who were willing to assist them as schools. However, what was made clear was that the SMT was supposed to be willing to ask for help. Participants further stated that collaboration was a powerful tool that could be used to manage school violence. They further maintained that regardless of the size of the group or team, collaboration

can be successful if all stakeholders within the group or team are willing to work towards a common goal.

In adopting a whole-school approach to school violence, participants asserted that a buy-in of all stakeholders was necessary. Participants mentioned that the only time that approaches to managing school violence were rendered successful was when stakeholders were willing to participate in its implementation, not merely having it present on paper where it remained useless. Participants from schools that had a buy-in of all stakeholders; the SMT, educators, learners, school governing body (SGB) and external stakeholders, observed that collaboration was at its optimum where every stakeholder was driven to protect the school against indiscipline. One participant even mentioned that, as a principal, he got the SMT to buy-in to managing school violence by getting level one teachers involved in the management of the school. This is demonstrative of collaborative leadership. The key finding was that participants asserted that the buy-in and collaboration could be influenced by the leader of the school through collaborative leadership practices. If a leader sees a threat to collaboration, he can apply his collaborative leadership skills and influence the situation by asking the 'owners' of the school, i.e., the community, to get on board and to elect those who are willing to serve in the best interest of the learners and the school at large. They stated that by the leader leading by example, the community sees the investment made by the leader. Participants who claimed that school violence was successfully managed at their schools stated that the SMT established networks with organizations that were helping other schools in the education district. They did not sit back and complain about the many things that the Department of Education (DoE) was not doing to assist them. Rather, they took it upon themselves to engage, form networks and work towards the creation of a safe environment for all. The findings also revealed that, if all members are accountable, collaboration can be heightened as all SMT members would contribute to the implementation of policy once they are held accountable and are responsible.

## Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the collaborative leadership strategies used by school management teams to manage school violence and the findings of the study showed that such strategies were in existence and that through collaborative leadership, school management teams were influencing all stakeholders to collaborate for the good of the school. It is recommended that school management teams adopt a collaborative leadership approach in managing violence in schools, and further lead by example of what they want to achieve for their schools. In doing so, adopting a collaborative leadership approach will encourage stakeholders to approach all aspects of school management with stakeholders who have a vested interest in the school.

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Dr. Amy Sarah Padayachee, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

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