

# Review of: "School instability in South Africa: a Systematic Review of Reflections and Experiences for a way forward"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Review of the article entitled: **School instability in South Africa: a Systematic Review of Reflections and Experiences for a way forward.**

## OVERALL COMMENT

School instability is a topical issue, particularly in light of the South African legislation prohibiting corporal punishment, thus requiring nuanced approaches to maintaining school discipline in the holistic molding of learners. In fact, it could be said that the way teachers are trained – what they are trained to know and do in schools – is perhaps far behind the dynamic situation taking place in the schooling context. In a democratic South Africa, where also family structures are broken down and societies outside engage in violence, it is a no wonder that violence permeate all spheres of social life, including schools. Thus, the topic promises to address a thorny societal issue infiltrating schools.

My concerns relate to how the topic is framed, the absence of a description of methodology, focused justification of relevance of theory. I also make comments of technical nature at the end of this review. Overall, I think the study could benefit from being more focused on *relevant, concise* descriptions of its themes, while avoiding narrative accounts, including adding more recent scholarly, empirical work to back its assertions than sometimes relying on anecdotal evidence and fewer sources.

## TOPIC

Your topic, "School instability in South Africa: a Systematic Review of Reflections and Experiences for a way forward" should be more focused, consistent it states the purpose of the study in either in the abstract or introduction.

On one occasion, you (authors) say your study "**elucidates** the **primary** factors contributing to **school instability** in KwaZulu-Natal, as derived from current academic literature", while you had just said, "The present study **investigates** **diverse** factors contributing to **educational instability** in KwaZulu-Natal, drawing upon data derived from published literature and the authors' first hand involvement as education administrators" in the abstract (**my bold italics**).

Firstly, I am not convinced that the use of the word "primary" is more appropriate. I think it is hard to say with certainty that factors extracted from reflections and literature are primary, let alone those discovered by reflective experience, for one can still dig beneath "primary" to find even deeper factors. Moreover, the words "primary" and "diverse" may be removed. While you have found some factors, they may be diverse than primary.

Finally, the topic is entitled “**school instability in South Africa**”, but the introduction speaks of “school instability in KwaZulu Natal”, while the abstract speaks of “education instability in KwaZulu Natal”. There must be consistency in the use of words to avoid confusion or vagueness.

#### **ABSTRACT:**

The abstract seems to lack completion. For example, the purpose, method, and findings are given; but the theoretical framework is not mentioned.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

**Overall point:** the introduction is not focused on the concept of school instability, and leading to the purpose of the paper is not yet a convincing problematization of school instability.

**Detailed commentary:** In the first paragraph of the introduction, the paper appears to overuse the work of one author, who is also the co-author of the paper in question. And this seems to be the case throughout the paper. This should be avoided in instances where there is vast literature on the topic.

I also note that the paragraph contains over-broadening of the introduction, perhaps at the expense of a more focused introduction to the topic. Be concise and focused in the introduction by answering a broad question on school instability. You can make a broad point about the importance of education in one sentence and quickly get us into the focus on school instability.

In the same introduction, you seem to make several claims, such as the euro-centricity of education system and the effect this has on the way students see themselves and form their sense of self. Then you go on to talk about effects on the human psyche. I think these points, unless their relevance is properly justified by establishing their link to school instability, may be removed altogether and replaced with more focused points. Otherwise, they constitute what I have called over broadening of the introduction.

My submission is this: Use the introduction to make a general point about school instability and the problems associated with at the outset. Make several citations in this regard, with minimum reliance on the current author’s source material.

#### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework chosen may very well be helpful in the illumination of the problem of school instability and the interpretation of results from empirical literature.

If one looks at the research being undertaken, there is school instability in which “school” itself is a context, an environment with its dynamics brought about by the coming together of learners from familial and societal contexts, which are themselves influenced by their tribal, cultural, economic, religious, educational factors. What I cannot see properly in the description of the theory, as in the succeeding topics, is the theorization of the school using the chosen theoretical framework. The theorisation seems to bring a learner in the context of factors external to him/her, which is fine; but there

is less theorisation about the school systems, structures, cultures, rules and regulations or policies that may be related to mitigation and standardisation of behaviour of learners from different contexts. The omission of relevance of theory to the nature of internal school structures and cultures appears to extricate the learner from school and governmentality, while giving credence to other levels of influence outside school. This, although not wrong per se, at the end, I think, puts to question the very propositions related to schools in the recommendations of the study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Overview*

This section mainly describes literature on internal and external factors influencing instability in schools. My concern is that given that this study few empirical sources are invited; authors seem to rely on newspapers, unions, and anecdotal evidence. Moreover, the actual review takes on a narrative and descriptive form. I think the authors should engage this concern.

### *Specific comments:*

I suggest that you be concise under the heading “**School instability**”. For example, the first two paragraphs can be condensed into a few sentences leading to the third paragraph.

My reading is that very little to no treatment of the concept of school instability has been done in the section, leaving questions hanging about international trends on school instability, interventions, and difficulties in implementing these, including what differences, if any, exist between global trends and South Africa (and KZN in particular).

Under causes of school violence, the use of the word “causes” needs to be revised. Causation, especially in social sciences, is difficult to prove than relationships between two states of affairs. Additionally, some of the stuff under this topic belong in the background, others in the conceptualization of school violence than under “causes”. This is a structural, logical issue authors should consider.

Under **causes of school violence**, the first paragraph of the sub-topic is also circumlocutory. For example, in one sentence, it could be expressed that violence in schools traumatizes learners and teachers. This, I think, is an issue of conciseness which I think needs to be mastered throughout the paper.

Under the sub-topic, “the role of learner’s leadership”, two comments are worth noting. First, the topic above the sub-topic, “Violence and crimes from outside the school”, presupposes a discussion about external rather than internal policy and decision-making processes of school. But this is not what the next sub-topic deals with. Second, in the actual discussion of the sub-topic, “role of learner’s leadership”, it is unclear why learner’s involvement in the code of conduct is linked to school instability or factors influencing the latter. Are you suggesting that learners are violent when they feel that the rules made were imposed, or that being excluded in the making of the rules contributes to an unstable atmosphere? If so, in what way(s)? In either

case, these would be assertions, requiring theory and empirical literature to back them up.

Under “**Reported instances of community protests and robberies**”, the whole paragraph seems rather narrative and descriptive rather than investigatory as suggested in the topic. Moreover, no empirical work is provided to back what appears to be anecdotal evidence of instances of violence in protests and their effect on the psychology of learners and students. Somewhat, the first paragraph under “inter-factional conflicts” contains the same challenges highlighted above.

## **METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

The study, in the abstract, hints at the use of secondary data and personal experiences as means to collect data on the basis of which to make findings. In the theoretical framework, it is also hinted that you may have conducted interviews, except that this is not clarified in the methodology. Nor is there a section committed to clarifying the methodology employed in the study. No description of how authors went about selecting the “data derived from published literature”.

I would have hoped to see a clear clarification on how the reviewed literature was selected, and the basis of the selection. Also, one would further hope for a clarification on how the themes discussed were arrived on, whether inductively or deductively.

## **MODELS TO DEAL WITH VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL INSTABILITY**

The study proposes a couple of dimensions, amongst which is ethical guidance on learner and a need for teachers to have emotional competence to shape the moral virtues of the student. It would have been useful to test this and other dimensions of the model against the theorization of different levels which interface and converge to shape the holistic persona of learners.

## **TECHNICAL COMMENTS**

You will need to proofread the work in order to correctly cite sources, amongst other things. The cited newspapers and individual persons outside the academic field need to be cited properly – perhaps unless absolutely necessary, these can be minimized or avoided.