

# Confronting a leadership vacuum: the principal's leadership role in peace education in South African schools

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This research aimed to assess the leadership role of principals in the implementation of peace education in selected secondary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study employed qualitative research approach to assess the leadership role of principals in the implementation of peace education in selected secondary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. Data were gathered from a small sample of six principals from six selected secondary schools which were engaged in the implementation of a peace education programme, and data were analysed using thematic content analyses.

**Findings** – Findings of the study suggest that principals possess a low level of understanding or awareness of their leadership role in the implementation of peace education. The study pointed out the constraints such as time constraints and learners' negative attitudes and social influences hinder the effective implementation of peace education in selected secondary schools.

**Research limitations/implications** – First, the data were self-reported and therefore subject to social desirability bias; participants may have provided socially desirable responses rather than their true belief or experiences. Thus, participants may have overstated their role in and commitment to the peace education programme.

**Originality/value** – Studies that aim to explore alternative approaches to combat violence, such as peace education, are still limited in South Africa. Hence, this paper served to close that gap by contributing to the growing body of research on the leadership role of the principal in the implementation of peace education in the school and exploring barriers hampering its effective implementation.

**Keywords** Leadership, Principals, School violence, Peace, Peace education, Moral leadership, South Africa

**Paper type** Original article

## Introduction

Peace education in schools has been implemented worldwide over the past decades. Since the horrors of World War II, it has gained momentum due to the increasing recourse to violence in responding to conflict between individuals, groups, communities and countries (Mishra, 2015). To date, peace education is one of the most significant strategies for cultivating attitudes and values of tolerance, empathy, non-violence and respect among learners (Zamalieva, 2020).

This study was motivated by the global increase in violence in schools, also in South Africa (Le Mottee and Kelly, 2017; Qwabe *et al.*, 2022). According to UNESCO (2017), about



246 million learners involve in some form of violence while at school. In South Africa, Monthly, about 15% of learners in South African schools encounter different kinds of violence at school. Increasingly, learners are likely to bring unlawful lethal weapons such as knives and guns onto school premises (Hendricks, 2018). Furthermore, school violence, particularly physical and verbal bullying, has affected not only learners but also educators (Sibisi, 2016). Incidences of crime-related violence are often associated with the easy access of young people to drugs, lethal weapons and gang activities (Du Plessis, 2008). Pahad and Graham (2012) remark that since schools are a microcosm of the broader community, social ills prevalent in communities permeate the school environment. If school violence is not brought under control, schools in South Africa will suffer lasting consequences as young people are slowly becoming violent criminals, drug addicts and anti-social individuals. School violence deprives children of their fundamental right to education and affects teachers' efficiency and morale (Mboweni, 2020).

Against this background, the task of creating a peaceful school environment poses a great responsibility to principals as school leaders (Netshitahame and Van Vollenhoven, 2002; Memduhoglu and Oren, 2023). Principals are at the apex of all activities in the day-to-day functioning of schools. Principals as school leaders should create and promote a school ethos aligned with the main values and principles of peace and address all the structural and cultural factors contributing to non-violence in schools (Brooks and Hajir, 2020). However, studies that explore the leadership role of the school principal in the implementation of peace education in South African schools are lacking. To address this gap, the main research question was formulated: What is the leadership role of principals in the implementation of peace education in South African schools? The main research question was addressed by a qualitative study which explored the experiences and perceptions of six principals on their leadership role in the implementation of peace education in six selected secondary schools in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. The principals all serve in schools in which a peace education programme for learners has been implemented since 2011.

### **Theoretical grounding and literature review**

The qualitative study was informed by the theory of integrative theory of peace together with reflection on moral leadership in relation to peace education; this is discussed in the ensuing section. Thereafter, attention is given to defining the concept of peace and peace education. The moral leadership role of the principal in the implementation of peace education and barriers to the implementation of peace education in schools are expounded.

#### *The integrative theory of peace*

This study is grounded in the integrative theory of peace (ITP) proposed by Danesh (2006, 2008a, b). According to this theory, peace is dependent on interactions between and among ethical, political, psychological, and spiritual states which are expressed through intra- and interpersonal interaction within a geographical location by groups of people (Danesh, 2006). This peace as a state of being is a product of one's worldview, which is fulfilled as a result of one's individual cognitive abilities, choices, and commitment to pursue peace (Danesh, 2006). Danesh (2008a, b) argues that peace is an encompassing condition of being that influences all the spheres of human existence. In essence, peace is dependent on intimate and interpersonal relationships where individuals support the culture of peace (Danesh, 2006). Through this theory, Danesh (2006, 2011) wanted to develop integrative peace education that embraces the various goals of and approaches to peace. In this study, it is argued that schools can provide an important setting for increasing knowledge of learners about peace and empowering them with positive attitudes and skills needed to become peace builders (Gul *et al.*, 2020). Education

can serve as vehicle or agent in developing and transforming cultural values to learners to become peaceful (Darolia, 2020). Therefore, according to Lashway (2006), schools can serve as moral institutions for promoting social norms and principals through moral leadership can act as moral agents who often make decisions that favour one moral value over the other. Morality includes principles that guide human conduct based on what is viewed as right or wrong, good or bad (Imo, 2007). It also entails norms governing social conduct such as character, customs, and habits. Therefore, morality is vital to attain and sustain peace in society, because enduring peace cannot be achieved in situations of injustice, deceit, discord, and mistrust (Nwaubani and Okafor, 2015). Below, I provide reflections of moral leadership and its relation to peace education.

#### *Reflections on moral leadership and its relation to peace education*

Based on the above discussed tenets and principle of the integrative of theory peace, I argue that moral leadership and peace education are inherently interconnected since they both are embedded in shared values of empathy, compassion, social justice, and ethical decision-making (Bajaj, 2015). Moral leadership is grounded in the broader notion of moral sense, which emphasises the importance of leaders to demonstrate strong ethical values and principles in their decision-making and behaviour. The concept of moral leadership entails the process of influencing others by shaping their personal values, ethical principles and beliefs which guide moral behaviour (Northouse, 2018). Morality as the basis of leadership is significant for educational success. On the other hand, peace education is an approach to education that promotes values, knowledge, and skills necessary to create a culture of peace (Salomon and Cairns, 2011). Thus, moral leadership can be seen as a key component of peace education. In the context of peace education, moral leaders are viewed as individuals who have a deep commitment to promoting peace and non-violence and who are willing to advocate peace education in their schools and community. Morality is the basis for principals as leaders to create a supportive and inclusive school culture, which promotes collaborative decision-making and fosters peaceful relations (Bafadal *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, Khan and Soomro (2020) reiterate that principals through moral leadership are expected to develop and sustain high morals among teachers and learners to ensure quality education in a peaceful environment. Similarly, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) underscore that principals should implement peace education by exhibiting moral leadership which involves their commitment to social justice, ethical decision-making and promotes value-based actions. In summary, principals who embody moral leadership are better equipped to foster an environment conducive to peace education, which is the argument of this paper.

#### *Understanding peace and peace education*

Peace is a broad, vague and continuously evolving concept with different connotations (Lin *et al.*, 2008; Cabedo-Mas, 2015). In general, peace is often viewed as the foundation for stability, progress and flourishing in human society, for without peace there is no development (Mbongo and Ndiritu, 2016). Peace means more than the absence of war and includes eliminating and combating all form of violence either direct, cultural, or structural. As indicated by the Global Peace Index (GPI), the concept of peace is also defined as the relationship between negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace is the existence of harmony, which is normally achieved by the absence or the fear of violence. On the other hand, positive peace is defined as “the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies” (IEP, 2019).

Peace education encompasses both the key concepts of peace and education. According to Salomon (2002), peace education entails education designed to empower individuals to live in peace among opposite groups, such as minorities, ethnic groups and those from various social

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classes and religions. It is about furnishing individuals with skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to resolve conflicts through non-violence and peaceful means. According to [Badrkhani \(2020\)](#), peace education is unique in its approach because it does not only focus on individuals but also on relations between groups of people. By and large, peace is viewed as culture and lifestyle, which can be promoted through the provision of education. Therefore, the fundamental goal of peace education is promoting the culture of non-violence or acting against the culture of violence in response to conflict between individuals and groups. Peace education also involves those aspects of formal and informal education implemented in and outside school aimed at combating group prejudice, stereotypes, violence, exclusion, and destruction ([Nsikak-Abasi and Nneji, 2010](#)). The next section discusses the principal's moral leadership role in implementing peace education in schools.

#### *The principal's moral leadership role in peace education*

Leadership as a concept has been defined differently ([Amini et al., 2019](#)). [Akpapere et al. \(2019\)](#) view leadership as an action of leading two or more people, where one attempts to influence others' behaviour towards the accomplishment of goals. [Armstrong \(2012\)](#) further notes that leadership means to inspire people to do their utmost to attain a desired goal or result. Leadership remains a significant aspect in school administration because it through leadership that direction is given to school stakeholders ([Orapabo, 2020](#)). According to [Stavrou and Kafa \(2024\)](#), leadership style involves all sets of practices, attitudes and actions applied by school leaders to influence the behaviour of teachers or and learners. The principal's main responsibility is to enhance the school's teaching and learning activities, namely the instructional leadership role ([Plaatjies, 2019](#)). In this sense, [Shaked \(2023\)](#) posits that school principal's instructional leadership is often linked with higher learner achievement, increased teacher satisfaction and improved school climate through setting clear goals and ensuring teachers accomplish them. However, the principal's leadership role also involves providing support and motivation to teachers and monitoring the effective implementation of different programmes. [Hussin and Waheed \(2016a, b\)](#) argue that the most recognised leadership strategies in schools are instructional, transformational, and moral. [Benoliel \(2020\)](#) introduces the concept of transformational leadership, which is closely related to moral leadership, as it involves inspiring followers to achieve higher performance and moral development, both crucial to creating a safe school culture, reducing violence, and enriching learning. Thus, the essence of transformative leadership is about bringing positive social, and material change in schools and surrounding communities ([Shields, 2009](#)). In the quest for peace, principals should motivate teachers and learners to cooperate in the implementation of peace education. Therefore, the transformational leadership role of principals is a driver of the goal of peace education in schools.

[Isaacson \(2013\)](#) indicates that moral leaders also promote care for and among learners, colleagues, parents, and community members. The principal's moral leadership role also entails directing school programmes, including peace education programmes ([Okorie, 2019](#); [Egwu, 2014](#)) and inspires others' commitment to a peace project. To achieve these principles as moral leaders, require good communication skills and a communication network. Their moral leadership role also entails ensuring that learners are taught the importance of kindness and using language that promotes social cohesion ([Okorie, 2019](#)). Moreover, the principal's moral leadership role also involves sensitivity to cultural differences and the promotion of cultural values which create harmony. In addition, principals can promote peace education through effective supervision. This involves monitoring learners' activities and ensuring that needs of both teachers and learners are taken care of ([Okorie, 2019](#)). Furthermore, the moral leadership role of principals in promoting peace education involves the protection of human rights, which are fundamental to peace education ([Turan, 2020](#)).

Since fairness and justice are essential to peace education, principals as moral leaders should exemplify fairness in dealing with both teachers and learners and when provoked, should refrain from being drawn into conflict (Wright *et al.*, 2016).

#### *Barriers to implementing peace education through moral leadership*

Gursel-Bilgin and Bengu (2021) indicate that structural, cultural, social, and political barriers hinder the effective implementation of peace education in schools. Abebe *et al.* (2006) found that teacher overload, poor leadership by principals, poor parent involvement, shortage of financial resources and teaching materials, lack of peace education training and poor coordination among organisers of peace education programmes as well as language barriers, especially among minorities hinder peace education in schools. A lack of political will to support the chosen peace education team (Chelule, 2014) and ineffective evaluation of peace education programmes are also hindrances (Momanyi, 2018). Bajaj (2015) stresses that measuring the impact of moral leadership in peace education remains a challenge. Therefore, it is critical to develop appropriate evaluation tools that capture the transformative effects of moral leadership on learners' values, attitudes, and behaviour to inform programme design and improvement. Zembylas *et al.* (2016) indicate that most learners reject peace education because of the dominant use of teacher-centred pedagogy in schools.

In the following section, the research methodology adopted in this study is presented.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative inquiry guided by the interpretive paradigm explored the principal's leadership role in the implementation of peace education in South African schools. The interpretive paradigm was deemed suitable to obtain in-depth understanding of the perspectives of participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) and understand the meaning which they ascribed to a social problem.

#### *Sample and sampling procedure*

I used purposeful sampling procedures to select six principals from six secondary in the Western Cape Province, South Africa, who are actively participating in the Non-Violent School Campaign programme (NVSC) launched in 2011 under the auspices of the Quaker Peace Centre (QPC), a non-governmental Organisation (NGO) based in Cape Town. Eleven secondary schools in the Western Cape currently implement the programmes of the QPC. The objective of the programme is to increase the number of individuals in schools who are willing to act against all forms of violence to ensure a conducive teaching and learning environment in schools. The QPC in partnership with the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) organises workshops and conferences where best practices to reduce school violence are discussed.

Thus, the six secondary schools were considered information-rich data collection sites and were nominated by the programme manager of the QPC. All the principals of the above-mentioned schools met the following criteria: they had more than two years' experience in the implementation of the NVSC in their schools and had demonstrated a higher level of commitment to the programme than the other principals who were not interviewed. As result, they were considered information-rich participants, whose experience of the implementation of the NVSC was valuable. The principals' teaching experience ranged from 15 to 34 years. Four principals ( $n = 4$ ) were male and two were female ( $n = 2$ ). The principal with the highest qualification had a master's degree. None of the principals had received specific training in peace education.

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### *Data collection*

Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with the six principals. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) describe the semi-structured interview as a flexible research tool to find out about pre-specified interests, which demonstrates an openness to new and interesting issues. I used the semi-structured interview because of its interactive uniqueness, and it enabled me to come face to face with the participants to obtain reliable data on the principal's leadership role in the implementation of peace education (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). An interview guide was developed as a tool for guiding discussions and focused on three main questions: What was the need for peace education in schools? What was the leadership role of the principal in the provision of peace education? What barriers exist to the implementation of peace education in schools?

### *Data analysis*

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim without the correction of grammatical errors. Thereafter, the data were coded into different categories per question. During this process, anonymity and confidentiality of all participants were ensured by assigning codes to the participants (e.g. Principal 1 = P1, P2 and so on). Thematic content analysis (Leedy and Ormrod, 2015) was employed to identify recurring themes in data. The generated themes formed the basis for the response to the research questions raised for this study and were also guided by the literature review, theoretical framework, and the aim of the study. Three broad themes emerged from the analysis: the need for peace education, the principal's moral leadership role in peace education and barriers to peace education in schools.

### *Ethical considerations*

I obtained permission from my institution, the University of South Africa. In addition, I obtained approval from the director of the QPC and the WCED. The six principals gave written consent to participate in the interviews after the study aim was explained to them. Their anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using the codes P1 to P6 to represent each participant; pseudonyms were assigned to each school; voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study at any time were also upheld. Additional verbal consent was obtained in all cases where interview sessions were recorded. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min respectively.

## **Findings and discussion**

This section presents the themes that emerged from data analysis, which are as follows: the need for peace education in schools; the principal's moral leadership role in peace education; and barriers to peace education.

### *Need for peace education in schools*

The first question probed the principals' perceptions on the need for implementing peace education in schools. Participants provided several reasons for implementing peace education, which were not contradictory to each other in terms of goals. They viewed peace education as a strategy to combat the prevalent incidents of school violence and to create a culture of peace in their schools. They regarded peace education as a necessary tool to transform society by creating a conscience among learners that rejects violence.

Participant (P1) commented:



I would say peace education is necessary in our schools. I would use the example of one learner from my school recently that went out in the community and tried to rob somebody, and then also not only to try to rob the person but also used violence on the woman. You know, in this very Women's Month.

The participants also saw peace education as an important tool needed in school to groom young learners, especially those in lower grades, so that they could channel their energy positively and be equipped with skills to resolve conflict through peaceful means. Principal (P3) said:

So, yes, peace education is necessary, especially when you have these younger learners coming in. In terms of Grade 8 and 9s for example, they have this excessive amount of energy, you know they are in their early teens. They see violence as the only means of resolving issues, you know, and we, of course, at school see when learners do get into Grade 10, Grade 11, then they are settling down. So, peace education for me within my school is needed for that.

Moreover, findings indicated that peace education is necessary to build a culture of peace in schools. Principal (P2) said:

I think for my school, yes, it is necessary, it only builds a culture of peace, you know, builds a culture of peace, but it should happen at all schools. It should happen at all schools, to make a difference in the community.

This is consistent with the [UNESCO \(1999\)](#), which describes a culture of peace as characterised by attitudes, behaviour and values based on respect for life, human rights and promotion of non-violence which should be embraced by all individuals in schools. The function of peace education is to act as a social mechanism that furnishes individuals with skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values essential for the development of people and society ([Mishra, 2021](#)). Another principal (P4) asserted:

It is necessary for us to have peace education based on that we are in an environment that is where there is crime, gangsterism, I mean everything is just in this environment is full of violence. So if our learners are trained they can, you can practice this peace education.

The foregoing responses of the participants indicated that the six schools represented by the principals were affected by high levels of violence, hence the need to implement peace education. In relation to this finding, [Le mottle and kelly \(2017\)](#), [Qwabe et al. \(2022\)](#) affirm that violence in schools, in particular secondary schools, is a global phenomenon and South Africa is no exception.

#### *The moral leadership role of the principal in the provision of peace education*

The second question posed during the interviews sought to assess the principals' understanding of their moral leadership role in peace education. The findings indicate that the principals had little understanding or awareness of their moral leadership role in the implementation of peace education in spite of their schools' participation in the NVSC programme organised by the QPC since 2011. Although P2 stressed the role of school leadership in setting the tone for peace education in the schools, he also acknowledged his limited knowledge of peace education due to a lack of training. According to him, the QPC did not provide orientation or training for the principals of schools in which their programme was currently implemented. He believed that the principal's leadership role should involve providing support to the teachers and learners and managing the extramural activities of peace education. P2 stated:

I really don't have much knowledge of this peace education and what my role as principal entails. I think maybe because we were not well trained by QPC. What I know is that we need to participate as educational leaders, if we don't provide support the teachers and learners may not succeed alone.

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Maybe one could manage the extramural activities of peace education. This is my thinking ok . . . I would say ya [yes] it is important to monitor the programme.

The findings are substantiated by [Ashraf \(2019\)](#), who argues that teachers, including the school management team, are not adequately trained in peace education. [Enaigbe and Igbino ghene \(2016\)](#) agree that various stakeholders have inadequate knowledge about the concept of peace education, which may hinder its effective implementation.

A similar view was shared by P1 who also suggested the need for the school management team to provide support and to be involved in the planning and conducting of meetings with the staff to discuss ideas on how to ensure the effective implementation of peace education programmes in the schools. She remarked:

I think, as a manager or as a member of the school management team, to effectively implement peace education at the school . . . must first allow the programme to happen at the school . . . we need to provide support and become part and parcel of the programme . . . be involved in the planning. When we have meetings at the school, as the management and the staff, we need to have an item where we are discussing the peace issue at the school.

P4 concurred:

I think the district, circuit managers and principals must check that it is implemented effectively] in schools. This is just my thinking but I wish the QPC also provide us principals some training so that we are clear on what this peace education is all about and what our roles entails. I have not attended any peace education training.

The findings are consistent with [Egwu \(2014\)](#), who regards the principal's moral leadership role as providing guidance, organising seminars and programmes, and displaying effective leadership regarding peace education. This support motivates teachers and learners to commit positively to peace education. Similarly, [Okorie \(2019\)](#) underscores that principals as moral leaders can promote peace education by monitoring the related activities of learners and teachers who serve as peace champions in their schools.

Another principal suggested the importance of schools communicating and forming partnerships with parents to share ideas. He suggested that schools and parents should meet, discuss matters of peace, and share ideas to promote peace in schools. P2 elaborated as follows:

During parents' meetings we must also talk about it [peace education]. Introduce it to the parents, you know these parents can bring inputs on how we can be able to promote peace in the school. Although I feel that we need to be trained from time to time as principals on how to involve parents in this peace education.

[Okorie \(2019\)](#) concurs that communication is a vital element that serves as a bridge to peace in schools and to avoid misconceptions about issues which can trigger violence and destroy peaceful coexistence among members of the school. [Enaigbe and Igbino ghene \(2016\)](#) concur that parents have a key role to play in supporting the implementation of peace education activities in schools and their inputs matter. Furthermore, principals through collaborative decision-making, an essential aspect of moral leadership, can involve teachers, learners and parents in decision-making which promotes effective implementation of peace education ([Northouse, 2018](#)).

Findings indicated that participants use peer mediation as a strategy to ensure relative peace in schools. One principal indicated that his leadership role involves monitoring the anti-bullying programmes and peer mediation that takes place in their school, in which learners serving as peace buddies would approach him for permission to act as mediator. P2 said:

We have a group of learners here [in the school] that are mediators. They have got some bullying programmes and sometimes help learners when they are fighting. When fighting start, those kids [peace buddies] will come and say, 'Principal, can you allow us to go and have a word with them, so that we can mediate between these two people, so I would say this is what I normally do.



Another principal also indicated the functioning of peer mediators:

We've got peer mediators . . . That are involved with the Quaker Peace Center. Most of them attend workshops training and when they return, they organise Anti-Bulling week, and peace campaigns. Sometimes they go to classes and have some sessions with the learners. This is what we are doing. I was never in the classroom to see what they are doing, but you can see the interest among learners.

The findings concur with [Ntho-Ntho and Nieuwenhuis \(2016\)](#) who found that principals as leaders have a special role and moral obligation to reconcile disparate views of teachers and learners. School principals by virtue of their moral leadership role should monitor and oversee any programme that aims to bring change in the school by means of peer mediation. In the same vein, [Ekpoh \(2015\)](#) asserts that principals as moral leaders should encourage extra-curricular activities that aim to impart peace values to learners as part of the school programme.

#### *Barriers to the implementation of peace education*

Findings with regard to interview question three regarding the barriers to the implementation of peace education revealed that time constraints, negative societal influence, lack of funding and negative attitudes hinder implementation of peace education. These sub-themes are discussed below.

Firstly, in the six schools, participants viewed the amount of time allocated to peace education as insufficient given the amount of work that needs to be done to combat the problem of violence. One principal also blamed lack of time and inadequate transport for learners for the poor attendance of peace education activities, which normally take place during the weekends and after school. P3 said:

Majority of the programmes run after school hours. so, problem is most of our learners rely on public transport to come to school. So they cannot have the programme until late. Our children here at school don't reside in one community, where they could easily walk to school. So they need to catch their transport home, especially when workshops are held in a venue outside the schools, . . . sometimes these workshops are held on Friday afternoon and Saturday to adequate transport arrangement needs to be in place.

P2 commented further on the issue of time for the implementation of peace education:

I would say our major challenge is the issue of time. Currently the time allocated for peace for learners is not enough to make a visible impact. Children need enough time to hold their discussion on issues around peace and peaceful co-existence to be able to tack the menace of violence in our schools.

P3 added:

Time is a challenge because we can only accommodate this peace education activities after school hours, during school hours we are not allowed to allow anything that will disturb the teaching. Teachers are very busy trying to cover the syllabus.

An interesting point raised by P3 is the competing demands on scheduling made by the formal school syllabus and the extramural peace education programme. [Matindi \(2013\)](#) highlights the difficulty in delivering peace education during the regular school day because academic subjects are emphasised at the expense of value-based subjects, especially those which are not part of the formal curriculum. This concurs with the finding by [Harber and Sakade \(2009\)](#), who regard time as one of the greatest constraints for teachers, project workers and other educational actors who are responsible for peace education.

Negative social influence is a second barrier to the implementation of peace education. Social violence such as gang-related violence and inability to extend the programme of peace education to other schools can hamper its effective implementation. Most participants believe

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what is happening in schools mirrors everything taking place outside schools. Participants complained that this reduces the effort of the peace education programme to combat violence in schools. P3 said:

One of our biggest challenges is that our schools are situated in an area with a large population of about 4.5 million people. Our school struggle a lot, because they are situated in violent areas that impact negatively on teaching and learning due to gang violence. As result, we have a high learner dropout rate, because of fear; we know that kind of environment is not conducive to for a child to complete schooling,

P4 blamed the environment, which had a negative influence on the goals of peace education in schools. Findings reveal that learners regularly witness domestic violence at home, which poses a detrimental effect on the learner's development. P4 stated:

I think the environment have a lot to do on how learners behave. The destructive impacts of domestic violence have some damaging impact on learners' mental and physical wellbeing.

Principal 5 added:

As a school, we are trying our best to re-orientate the learners against violence, but domestic violence and gangsterism that is witnessed by these learners daily; I think it override the efforts of this peace education. Remember, beside what they see in society, social media, and violent movies that they watch on television also contributes to this menace.

The above assertion is supported by scholars such as [Pahad and Graham \(2012\)](#), who argue that since schools are microcosms of the broader community in which they are located, the social ills prevalent in the communities permeate the school environment. Schools as socialisation agents are the mirror of society; if society is violent, the school will follow.

The findings indicate that negative attitudes also hinder the implementation of peace education. P2 revealed that it was challenging to motivate learners to learn from their peers, since evidence suggests some learners display a negative attitude towards peer mediators and peace buddies. P2 said:

There are some challenges. Mostly, the learners don't take them [peer mediators] seriously. I mean others show them negative attitudes, saying I can't take instruction from other learners, especially when they are mediating them. However, there are a few learners who listen to them.

The above observations of the principals are in line with the observation by [Mwaniki \(2013\)](#) that a lack of common interest, confidence and motivation among various actors can cause some to avoid participating in programmes that aim to transform schools.

## Conclusion

The study was undertaken to assess the leadership role of principals in the implementation of peace education in six selected secondary schools in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. It was argued that moral leadership holds significant potential for fostering a culture of peace and non-violence. In particular, the study explored the perception of principals on the implementation of peace education in their schools and identified possible constraints to sustainable peace in secondary schools. Based on the findings, I conclude that most participants possess a poor understanding of their moral leadership role in the implementation of peace education. The study pointed out the constraints to the implementation of peace education as a strategy to combat violence in schools. It is argued that peace education is more important than ever in South Africa, and strong moral leadership by the principal is required to assist teachers and learners to drive its effective implementation. However, studies that aim to explore alternative approaches to combat violence, such as peace education, are still limited ([John, 2018](#)). Hence, this paper served to

close that gap by contributing to the growing body of research on the moral leadership role of the principal in the implementation of peace education in the school and exploring barriers hampering its effective implementation. The findings reveal that time constraints and negative social influences hinder the effective implementation of peace education in selected secondary schools.

Based on the findings, this study recommends the following to enhance the role of moral leadership in peace education practice and theory:

- (1) Professional development programmes for peace education should be prioritised to enhance the moral leadership role of principals to ensure its effective implementation. Seminars, conferences, and workshops on leadership should be periodically organised to empower principals to become effective moral leaders (Egwu, 2014).
- (2) Since peace education programmes should be sensitive to the cultural, social, and political context in which they are implemented, principals need to adapt their moral leadership practices to matches the unique needs of the local context, which, in this case, is the problem of school violence in South African schools.
- (3) Principals through moral leadership should ensure the training of learners to enhance their moral leadership and active participation in peace education programmes. This according to Okorie (2019) means that moral leaders need to ensure that learners reinforce the values of peace education through practical learning activities that sharpen their skills to act as leaders among their peers in school.
- (4) Positives attitudes need to be developed through continuous teacher training. Principals should ensure that time for peace education is created in the school programme and that peace education is integrated into the curriculum.

### Study limitation and suggestion for further study

Several limitations of the study warrant further attention in future research. First, the data were self-reported and therefore subject to social desirability bias; participants may have provided socially desirable responses rather than their true belief or experiences. Thus, participants may have overstated their role in and commitment to the peace education programme. Second, the programme manager's subjective recommendation for selecting the six schools may have introduced bias and lack of objectivity, which could have potentially influenced the representativeness of the selected schools. Third, the study assessed the leadership role of principals in the implementation of peace education in selected secondary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. Hence, generalisation of findings is not possible as the sample is not representative of all schools in South Africa. Instead, replication of this study is recommended across various provinces in South Africa.

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