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Elements Affecting Public Primary School Teachers in Safeguarding Learners' Right to Human Dignity in Classrooms

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Research Article

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Abstract

Safeguarding learners' right to human dignity is a critical component of creating a safe and supportive learning environment in public primary schools. However, teachers often face numerous challenges that can compromise their ability to safeguard learners' dignity. Therefore, this study examines the factors influencing public primary school teachers in ensuring learners' right to human dignity. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model informed the study. A qualitative research study was conducted. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, and the study was framed within the interpretivist paradigm. Ten experienced participants (five principals and five teachers) were purposively sampled from five ordinary public primary schools in the Bojanala District of the Northwest Province, South Africa. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and patterns related to factors that affect the safeguarding of learners' right to human dignity. The study revealed several key factors, including teachers' limited knowledge of the legal framework that recognizes learners right to the human dignity, inadequate teacher development, insufficient curriculum integration, and lack of monitoring and support, which compromise teachers' ability to safeguard learners' dignity. The study findings have implications for teacher professional development, school policy, and practice, emphasizing the need for a supportive school environment that prioritises the learners dignity and well-being.

Introduction

The concern for safeguarding learners' right to human dignity has evolved into a global policy framework. Safeguarding learners' right to human dignity is essential to ensuring they are treated appropriately as human beings. Safeguarding learners right to human dignity refers to the measures and practices that guarantee learners are free from any form of violation, such as discrimination, abuse, or neglect [1, 2]. Teachers who still grapple to safeguard learners right to human dignity pose a threat to learners' attainment of human dignity, as such struggles affect learners' sense of humanity, and that children felt disempowered to express their own opinions. Despite learners being the primary beneficiaries of quality education, their protection against any violation of their dignity remains a global and educational concern.

Safeguarding learners' right to human dignity is grounded in both national and international legal frameworks. South African Bill of Rights (1996), section 10[6] guarantees the protection of everyone's dignity, while South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, Section 10 (1) and (2) [7] ensures the protection of learners specifically. In alignment with this, international instruments such as Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) [8] and Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) [9] affirm every learner's right to dignity and to protection from violence in schools. Consequently, international law plays a vital role in safeguarding learners' safety and dignity in educational settings.

However, despite the existence of these strong legal frameworks that obligate teachers to safeguard learners right to human dignity as a critical aspect of creating a safe and supportive learning environment in public primary schools, research in South Africa reveals that teachers often experience numerous challenges that can compromise their ability to safeguard the dignity of learners [1, 10], and are also the perpetrators of dignity violations, often unintentionally or due to a lack of awareness [1, 3]. The aftermath of these challenges results in disciplinary actions and teacher dismissals in South African schools. For instance, the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) recently dismissed a teacher from Gold View Secondary School in Mahikeng for engaging in a sexual relationship with a learner. On the same day, the principal of Letsatsing Secondary School in Mmabatho was dismissed for sexually assaulting a Grade 8 learner [11]. The consequences of dignity violations can be severe, including emotional trauma, decreased academic performance, and increased dropout [24, 25]. These violations pose a challenge to learners right to human dignity.

The concern about safeguarding learners' right to human dignity extends beyond South Africa and remains a global issue. A study by Longobardi et al. in Italy found that teachers often punished learners by forcing them to stand or kneel in painful positions or to remain outside in harsh weather [12]. Similarly, Nearchou [13] in Greece reported that 64% of respondents (N = 223) had experienced at least one incident of emotional abuse by their teachers. These international studies demonstrate how schools have at times become spaces where learners' dignity is stripped away rather than safeguarded.

Several South African studies [1, 3, 14] confirm ongoing violations of learners' rights by teachers. Yet, there remains a lack of studies focusing specifically on the factors that affect teachers' ability to safeguard learners' right to human dignity in public primary schools. This article aims to explore these factors and their implications for teacher support and learner well-being.

Related Literature

Safeguarding learners' right to human dignity is a cornerstone of both international and national education systems. Around the world, governments and organizations have developed legal frameworks to ensure that children are treated with respect and shielded from humiliation, discrimination, and abuse. Therefore, this literature review examines the international and South African legal frameworks that safeguard this right and discusses the factors that affect its effective implementation globally and locally.

International Legal Framework

The international human law is strongly rooted in the notion of human dignity. The basis is laid by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR,1948) [8], which states that "everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person" in its preamble to Article 3. Similarly, the concept of 'non-discrimination' is affirmed in Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) [9], which guarantees equal protection under the law for all people, regardless of their race, colour, sex, or

socioeconomic background. Furthermore, ‘the inherent dignity of all members of the human family and their equal and inalienable rights are the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world,” according to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)[15]. All these international agreements acknowledge human dignity as an unalienable right and require nations to uphold it. As a result, they create a framework that upholds learners' right to human dignity in educational settings worldwide.

South African Law

In accordance with international norms, South Africa’s legal system safeguards learners' right to human dignity. “Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected, ” according to Section 10 of the Republic of South Africa’s 1996 Constitution [6]. This idea is further supported by the South African Schools Act (SASA). In particular, Section 10(1) forbids the use of physical punishment in schools, while Section 10(2) outlines the legal repercussions for violators [7]. Furthermore, a comprehensive legislative framework for safeguarding children’s welfare nationwide is established under the Children’s Act 38 of 2005[16]. When combined, these clauses compel teachers and school administrators to foster a polite, safe atmosphere where learners’ dignity is respected. As children’s second home, schools play a critical role in promoting emotional stability and avoiding physical and psychological humiliation.

Causes of Factors Affecting the Safeguarding of the Right to Human Dignity of Learners

Although the above-mentioned legal frameworks provide clear guidance, their implementation presents numerous challenges. Research conducted in South Africa indicates persistent obstacles that hinder teachers from fully upholding the safeguarding of the’ right to dignity of learners. For instance, several scholars found that teachers struggle with insufficient training, inadequate understanding of legislation, and limited learner engagement (Pietersen and Langeveld [17]; Odeku and Reguel [173]). These factors make it difficult for educators to apply the law effectively in daily school practices. Similarly, Kruger highlighted that many schools lack clear codes of conduct or separate policies that explicitly guide the safeguarding of learners' right to human dignity [18]. This lack of guidance often leaves teachers unsure of the correct procedures to follow. Furthermore, Potokri and Lumadi observe that teachers face difficulties disciplining learners in accordance with human rights law, particularly because such legislation restricts the use of punitive measures, such as corporal punishment [19].

On a global scale, similar issues emerge. A study conducted by UNICEF, which surveyed 88 experts from 26 countries, including Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, and Italy, found that the main challenges include lack of teacher training (54%), inadequate political commitment (38%), limited curriculum integration (26%), and weak political leadership (19%) Moreover, 36% of respondents emphasized the need for greater learner participation and education on rights [20]. Supporting this evidence, Onuma and Ogonnaya [21] and Philip et al [22] and report that insufficient monitoring and support structures undermine efforts to safeguard learners' right to dignity.

Thus, while the specific contexts differ, both South Africa and other nations face similar constraints, most notably, an insufficient training, a lack of policy clarity, and weak institutional enforcement mechanisms. Compared to international and South African frameworks, they share a strong commitment to safeguarding human dignity as a universal right [23]. They emphasize equality, non-discrimination, and teachers' obligation to uphold these principles within educational institutions. However, the key difference lies in the level of enforcement and institutional support. In developed countries, the challenges often revolve around curricular inadequacies and weak political prioritization; in contrast, in South Africa, the difficulties stem mainly from gaps in policy implementation and a lack of teacher capacity.

Conceptually, the literature reveals several interconnected themes: human dignity as a fundamental right [8,9,15,6], the teacher's role as a protector, the importance of legal and policy awareness, and systemic barriers affecting implementation [18, 20]. These themes collectively underscore that the safeguarding of learners' dignity requires not only strong legislation but also effective enforcement, training, and supportive educational cultures.

Implications of not Safeguarding the Right to Human Dignity on Learners

Failure to safeguard learners' right to human dignity in South African public primary schools is multifaceted and far–reaching. They may impact the psychological, physical, and academic well-being of learners. Research has shown the following outcomes:

Emotional and Physical Harm

Victims of emotional abuse experience long-lasting psychological trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety [24,25]. Additionally, physical violence often results in physical injuries, including broken bones, bruises, and cuts [14]. These emotional and physical signs prevent learners from engaging with peers and affect their academic performance [3].

Physical abuse interferes with the environment of learning, resulting in increasing learner dropout rates and lower academic performance [20,27]. Learners who experience trauma or fear for their safety are unable to concentrate on their studies. Lumadi, [1] assert that learners who suffer depression because of physical abuse led them to increase the possibility of dropping out of school and lose concentration in the long run, as they lack motivation. School sexual violence could also affect social, emotional, as well as health -related issues for learners. In accordance with [3], sexual violence and crime can consequently strain the relationship between teachers and learners, and the school management team, which could have a detrimental effect on teaching as well as learning.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is guided by Urie Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model [28], which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how human

development is influenced by the dynamic interaction between individual and environmental factors. This model is particularly relevant for exploring how teachers' perceptions, institutional structures, and broader societal systems influence the safeguarding of learners' right to human dignity.

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris [28], human development occurs through ongoing processes that involve individuals (persons), their surrounding environment (context), the interactions that shape growth (process), and the temporal dimension (time). As Rosa and Tudge [29] explain, factors such as social status, self-esteem, age, and beliefs significantly influence how people interact within their environments.

By using this approach in education, researchers examine how institutional circumstances, instructors' attitudes, and personal characteristics combine to affect teachers' capacity to respect learners' dignity [28,26]. Additionally, the PPCT model emphasizes that the fundamental mechanisms influencing development are proximal processes, or the regular contacts between teachers and learners [30]. Therefore, how teachers interact with learners daily may help determine whether their dignity is upheld in real life. The approach also acknowledges that individual traits, such as attitude and personality, may either support or impede ethical conduct and career advancement. In this situation, the PPCT framework serves as a lens to examine not only the moral and legal obligations of educators but also the impact of external support networks, including social norms, educational policies, and school leadership. A comprehensive knowledge of how to improve the preservation of learners' human dignity in schools is made possible by this model, which considers the interaction of environmental, temporal, and personal elements.

In summary, the theoretical framework and the literature examined show that while the importance of safeguarding learners' right to human dignity is widely acknowledged, it is not consistently applied. Both international and South African legal frameworks provide a solid foundation; however, challenges persist due to limited training, unclear policies, and weak institutional enforcement [1]. By applying Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, this study situates these issues within a broader ecological context, highlighting how individual, institutional, and societal factors collectively shape teachers' capacity to protect and respect human dignity in educational settings.

Research Questions.

- The following research questions guided this study:
- What are the key factors that affect teachers' ability to safeguard the right to human dignity of learners in public primary schools?
- How do these factors affect teachers' practices at public primary schools?

Objectives: This study aimed to explore the factors affecting teachers in public primary schools in safeguarding learners' right to human dignity. Specifically, the study sought to:

- . Identify the challenges faced by teachers in safeguarding learners' human dignity.

- Examine the impact of these factors on teachers' practices and learners' experiences.

Research Methodology

Design of Research

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a phenomenological design to explore teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding factors which influence public primary teachers in safeguarding learners right to human dignity in classrooms . According to Grand Canyon University[37], phenomenology examines people's lived experiences to understand their thoughts and emotions regarding a particular occurrence. The goal of phenomenological research, according to Creswell and Poth [31], is to demonstrate how language and concepts influence human comprehension.

Because it enabled the researcher to examine teachers' lived experiences, feelings, and attitudes regarding the reported breaches of learners' right to human dignity in schools, a phenomenological design was suitable for this study. The researcher could gain a thorough understanding of these experiences by employing this approach without imposing prior notions or being influenced by personal prejudices.

As a result, the phenomenological method proved useful for capturing how teachers view and address the challenges of safeguarding their learners' dignity. Therefore, the phenomenological approach was valuable for capturing the essence of how teachers perceive and respond to the factors affecting the safeguarding of learners' right to human dignity.

The Paradigm of Research

The interpretivist worldview, which supports the phenomenological technique, served as the foundation for this investigation. Interpretivism emphasizes how individual meanings within cultural and social settings impact human experiences, viewing reality as subjective and socially produced [38]. This paradigm, according to Prasad [33] allows researchers to comprehend occurrences from the perspectives of participants rather than via objective observations. By adopting this viewpoint, the researcher analysed teachers' experiences from their own perspectives, focusing on how they understand the difficulties they face in protecting learners' human dignity in schools. As a result, interpretivism made it possible for the study to delve into the depths of knowledge beyond generality.

Methods of Research

This study used a qualitative research methodology. According to Creswell and Poth [31], qualitative research is especially useful for thoroughly examining social and human behaviour. Flick [32] asserts that qualitative research offers a thorough analysis of people's experiences, while Prasad [33] highlights its effectiveness in revealing participants' lived realities, feelings, and views. This method was used because it enabled the researcher to examine how teachers perceive, understand, and address concerns about learners' dignity in the classroom. Additionally, the qualitative approach made it possible to gather

detailed, descriptive data that shed light on the underlying attitudes, values, and beliefs influencing teachers' actions. Consequently, this strategy was crucial in offering a comprehensive overview of the intricate social and human aspects of this subject.

Study Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select individuals who could offer pertinent and perceptive insights into the topic under study, in keeping with the qualitative methodology. Purposive sampling, as defined by Korstjens and Moser [34], is the deliberate selection of people, places, or activities that are most likely to produce rich, significant data. Purposive sampling, according to Creswell [35], was appropriate for qualitative research as it enables the researcher to find participants who know the topic of interest.

Teachers and principals from five public primary schools in the Bojanala District, South Africa, who had experienced violations of their rights to Human Dignity, participated in this study. Ten participants, five principals and five teachers, were chosen to guarantee a range of viewpoints and experiences. The data saturation principle, which states that data collection should continue until no new themes or insights emerge, is used to determine this simple size.

The inclusion of participants with firsthand knowledge of the research issue was made possible by the purposive sampling technique, which contributed significantly. Consequently, this helped the researcher obtain real, comprehensive insights that directly addressed the research objectives.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews, which provided participants an engaging forum to express their experience in their own words, were used to gather data. Interviews, according to Flick [32], are structured discussions that enable in-depth discussion of a subject. Because it combines structure and flexibility, the semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to follow a pre-planned set of questions while still asking for explanation and elaboration as needed. This approach was suitable for this study as it helped the participants and the researcher to develop a common understanding. It also enabled impromptu, in-depth conversations about delicate topics while preserving students' dignity [33]. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to interact sympathetically and record participants' individual meanings, which reinforces the study's interpretivist approach.

Data Analysis

The thematic framework approach outlined by Braun and Clarke [36] served as the direction for the thematic analysis of the interview data. Finding, examining, and interpreting patterns or themes in qualitative data is known as thematic analysis. It offers a methodical approach to rich, detailed data sets and descriptions.

To find patterns in the participants' responses, the researcher used an inductive coding approach. These were then grouped into topics reflecting teachers' attitudes, difficulties, and views on learners' human

rights. This enabled the researcher to interpret vast volumes of textual material, unearth deeper meanings, and present findings in a logical and significant manner. The thematic framework technique was crucial.

Steps to Guarantee Trustworthiness

The researcher established credibility through the data collection and analysis technique by using triangulation to ensure there was no bias in the outcomes. Thanh & Thanh [39] state that credibility assesses whether the research findings represent knowledge that may be inferred from participants' initial viewpoints. Transferability refers to the extent to which findings from qualitative research can be applied across different situations and to data from various participants [35]. The contexts and participants provided the researcher with sufficient, vivid, and comprehensive information regarding teachers' perceptions and understanding of safeguarding learners' human dignity [34]. However, the intention had not been to generalize the study's outcomes.

To maintain dependability, all data collected during the research process were triangulated by the researcher to identify common themes and support reliable findings. Confirmability refers to the extent to which other researchers confirm the research study findings to seek similar themes to provide a reliable one [35]. It aims to establish whether the researcher's interpretation and findings are drawn from the data and to provide evidence of how interpretations and conclusions were reached [40]. To ascertain confirmability, the researcher asked the supervisor to ensure the adequacy of the questions to verify whether they would measure what they intended.

Ethical consideration

This study was reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa (Ethics Approval Reference Number: [FCRE/EF/STD/2022/09]. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Participants received informed consent forms, which ensured they received sufficient information about the study. Subject to this, participants were assured of anonymity and informed that codes would be used. The codes were generated and used as follows: for Principals, the code 'P" was used (e.g., P2 stands for Principal 2), and for Teachers, the code "T" was used (e.g., T3 stands for Teacher 3). Participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time after completing the consent forms. The researcher informed the participants that completing the consent forms indicated their voluntary participation in the research (32). The following section discusses the study's findings.

Consent to publish

Informed consent to participate in the study and consent to publish were obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

Presentation of Results

The current study explored the factors affecting the safeguarding of learners' human dignity rights in schools, as experienced by the research participants. Safeguarding learners' human dignity in schools may involve various elements that generally shape the learning environment. Nevertheless, in this study, factors affecting human dignity as a right refer to the things that prevent all learners from receiving high-quality education. It further emerged that affecting factors are largely dependent on distinctive things arising from the school milieu. From the interviews, teachers reported a range of difficulties in ensuring human rights to dignity in schools. Based on the analysis, four main categories of challenges were identified under this theme:

- Lack of legal knowledge that recognises the right to human dignity of learners
- Lack of teacher development
- Lack of curriculum integration
- Lack of monitoring and support

Lack of Legal Knowledge that Recognises the Right to Human Dignity of Learners

The interview guide sought to explore participants' perceptions of the factors that affect learners' right to human dignity. A prominent issue that emerged was a lack of adequate legal knowledge regarding the safeguarding of learners' human dignity.

Several participants indicated that they were not fully familiar with the legislative frameworks and policies that guide safeguarding learners' human dignity. This gap in understanding made it difficult for teachers to interpret and implement these rights effectively in their daily professional practices. The lack of legal literacy among educators was therefore perceived as a critical barrier to ensuring that learners' dignity is respected and upheld within the school environment.

This concern was echoed in the participants' responses, as reflected in the following statements:

T 3: "*There is sometimes a lack of information, and having a clear policy about such education for the learners would help.*"

P 2: *"The Department of Education does not provide documents to read on matters related to learners' rights. We mostly fail to address issues with our children and do not assist educators with discipline.*"

Similar responses on a lack of knowledge were extended by P1 with the following comments:" *It is a lack of understanding, particularly about the legislation and how the law is interpreted. Some of the teachers who work with learners in our institution lack the necessary skills.*"

Furthermore, the participants were asked: How does the lack of legal knowledge regarding learners' human dignity rights affect teachers' practices in public primary schools? Responded in this way:

The participant T3 said: "I *think the lack of legal knowledge about the right to human dignity of learners can lead to unintentional violations and misunderstandings*."

P5:"*This lack of legal knowledge can make teachers more likely to prioritise discipline over dignity, which can create a culture of fear rather than respect*."

*Lack of Teacher Development***.**

A lack of teacher development was identified as a key factor preventing teachers from upholding the safeguarding of learners' human dignity. Almost all the participants stated that they had never worked on or been trained on safeguarding learners' rights to human dignity. The verbal quotes below illustrate how participants felt:

P2: *"The challenge is a lack of in-service training in terms of the protection of learners' rights. We are still far behind and it would be much appreciated if the government can support the schools?*

P:*, "Personally, I have never been trained; this is my 27th year as a teacher, and the training I attended was only about other curriculum delivery content.*

P5: "*The Department of Education does not provide the opportunity to empower us on matters related to learners' rights. We mostly fail to address issues with our learners and do not assist teachers with discipline."*

Furthermore, the research participants reported a lack of in-school teacher development in human rights, as reported by T1."There *is no teacher development in our school concerning anyone's right."*

T2 shared similar sentiments: *"Our in-school development yearly programme is available and implemented, but the concern is that aspects of human rights culture are not included."*

Some research participants blamed poor financial planning in their schools: "*The exclusion of human rights dignity empowerment is excluded in their school budget*. (T1).

Participants asked: How does the lack of teacher development affect teachers' practices in public primary schools? The verbal quotes below illustrate how participants may be affected:

P3 suggested: *"Without ongoing professional development, teachers may continue to use traditional ways of conducting themselves when engaging with learners that are no longer effective."*

T5 highlighted: "Teachers may not have the skills and strategies to manage challenging behaviours, leading to disruptions and decreased learning time."

Lack of Curriculum Integration

Participants identified inadequate integration of curricular knowledge as one factor impeding the safeguarding of learners' right to human dignity. The results show that the current national curriculum in

South Africa impedes teachers' ability to contribute to the safeguarding of learners' right to human dignity. The following quotes support the above:

T2 articulated, "*We lack appropriate teaching and learning material that uphold the right to human dignity. A human rights section can be found in the Social Science subject, but in my view, that section is too brief to enable a teacher to understand most of human rights, which, if violated, may affect learners' well-being. Also, not all teachers teach Social Science.*"

T3: "*We don't have proper teaching and learning documents that reflect the right to human dignity. There is a section on human rights in the Social Science subject, but in my view, such a section is so little to enable a teacher to understand most of human rights that if violated may affect the well-being of the learner.*"

"*The Department of Education provides us with Annual Teaching Plans (ATP) which stipulate what should be taught and also with time frames, with rigid content that is not embedded in all subjects,*" echoed P (5)

DP1: "*Well, what I can say is that it's time that we accelerate the teaching and prioritisation of learners' rights in schools. But at the same time, we must be very balanced and very careful. We do not just want some rights to appear to be coming up at the expense of the rights of other people; we must also not forget that these learners' rights go hand in hand with responsibilities.*"

When participants asked: How does the lack of curriculum integration affect teachers' practices at public primary schools? The verbal quotes below illustrate how participants may be affected:

P4 "*Without integration, subjects may be taught in isolation, leading to fragmented learning experiences for learners.*"

T5*: "Lack of integration can result in repetition of content across subjects, wasting valuable teaching time."*

Lack of Monitoring and Support, Department of Basic Education

According to the interview data, teachers believed that higher-level officials failed to adequately oversee and assist in safeguarding learners' right to human dignity in the Bojanala District. They highlighted that it is the department's responsibility to provide specific legal knowledge to ensure that learners' right to human dignity is safeguarded. The following verbal quotes validate the above information pointed out by the teachers:

T2 declared: "*I haven't heard or seen any official visit regarding upholding the learners' rights at our school*

P5:declared: "No, they do not monitor or support schools. I have never experienced that."

Another participant echoed :"*The protection of human rights is not monitored, human rights are mentioned in passing in the life orientation subject, and no specific emphasis is placed on them "*(T4).

The above quotes reveal that teachers view the lack of monitoring and support from Department of Basic Education (DBE) officials as a hindrance to safeguarding learners' right to human dignity in the Bojanala District public ordinary primary schools. It emerged that teachers have never been monitored or supported by DBE functionaries at their schools.

A probing question, “Do you think they must come?” followed, and this is what the participant shared:

P1: *“It is a significant gesture to always be visited by the senior to observe and evaluate school operations as to identify whether there are challenges or not.”*

When participants asked, "How does the lack of monitoring and support affect teachers’ practices at public primary schools?"

The verbal quotes below illustrate how participants may be affected:

T2: *“Without guidance and support, teachers may struggle to implement curriculum changes, policies, or new initiatives effectively*."

P1: "*Lack of monitoring and support can result in inadequate resources, including textbooks, technology, and infrastructure, hindering the ability to deliver effective lessons*."

Discussion

This study examined factors that affect the safeguarding of learners' right to human dignity in public primary schools. The results of the investigation highlight how difficult it is to safeguard learners' human dignity in schools. The findings show that several interrelated factors make it difficult for teachers to fulfil their responsibility to protect learners' human dignity. These include a restricted curriculum, inadequate training, insufficient institutional oversight and support, and a lack of legal expertise. These elements all fit within the PPCT components model, which shows how institutional and individual variables interact to affect teachers’ ability to safeguard learners’ rights.

Limited Legal Knowledge

Teachers’ limited knowledge of the legal framework that recognizes and protects learners’ rights is one of the main issues identified by the study. Given that teachers play a crucial role in ensuring that learners are treated with dignity and respect, this knowledge gap is substantial as evidenced by the quotes like of T3 *“there is sometimes a lack of information and having a clear policy about such education for the learners would help*”. Similarly, P2 stated *“The Department of Education does not provide documents to read on matters related to learner’s rights. We mostly fail to address issues with our children and do not assist educators with discipline”*. These responses corroborate the findings of Odeku and Reguel [41] who highlighted that South Africa possesses strong constitutional framework protecting human dignity, however, this study demonstrated that although constitutional protection exists it does not automatically translate to educator’s knowledge of the legal framework. Without a solid grasp of the applicable laws,

teachers risk inadvertently forgetting or violating rules intended to protect learners' welfare. By highlighting the significance of personal traits such as knowledge, abilities, and values in shaping professional conduct, the PPCT model illuminates this finding. In this regard, teachers' low legal literacy impairs their capacity to make defensible decisions that respect learners' dignity in routine school operations.

Lack of Teacher Training and Development

The study also shows that teachers are not trained in safeguarding the dignity of learners, which makes it harder to put legal principles into practice. These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted training programs that equip teachers with the skills, knowledge, and mindset to address human dignity challenges effectively. P2 stated "*The challenge is a lack of in-service training in terms of the protection of learner's rights. We are still far behind and it would be much appreciated if the government can support the schools?"* P5 added *"The Department of Education does not provide the opportunity to empower us on matters related to learners' rights. We mostly fail to address issues with our learners and do not assist teachers with discipline."* The study conducted by Munongi [42] who identified a continuing gap between policy and implementation in South African schools is consistent with the participant's inputs that lack of training makes it difficult for them to put legal principles into practice. This conclusion is consistent with the process component of the PPCT model, which emphasizes the impact of ongoing interactions and learning opportunities on human development. Therefore, regular professional development is essential for enhancing teachers' ability to uphold learners' dignity and address associated challenges in the classroom.

Curriculum Limitations

Another major barrier to advancing learners' dignity, according to the report, is the curriculum's strict and limited structure. Numerous teachers stated that the curriculum lacks the flexibility and substance needed to fully address human dignity in the classroom. T2 articulated *"We lack appropriate teaching and learning material that uphold the right to human dignity. A human rights section can be found in the Social Science subject, but in my view, that section is too brief to enable a teacher to understand most of human rights, which, if violated, may affect learners' well-being. Also, not all teachers teach Social Science."* T3 stated *"We don't have proper teaching and learning documents that reflect the right to human dignity. There is a section on human rights in the Social Science subject, but in my view, such a section is so little to enable a teacher to understand most of human rights that if violated may affect the well-being of the learner."* These findings are supported by the study conducted by UNICEF [2] which found that one of the challenges that affect the right to human dignity of learners is limited curriculum integration. This inflexibility limits students' chances to participate in conversations and exercises that promote moral awareness, empathy, and respect.

This result aligns with the PPCT model's contextual dimensions, which recognize that environmental factors such as curriculum design and institutional structures have a significant impact on behaviour

and learning outcomes. As a result, a curriculum that does not incorporate the concepts of 'human rights' and 'dignity' limits teachers' capacity to exemplify and uphold these ideals in the classroom.

Lack of Monitoring and Support

The study also shows that the lack of institutional support and supervision is a major barrier to protecting learners' right to human dignity. Teachers reported that there is insufficient oversight or direction from education authorities regarding the application of human dignity policies. This is supported by Onuma and Ogonnaya [21] and Philip et al [22] reporting that insufficient monitoring and support structures undermine efforts to safeguard learners' right to dignity. T2 declared *"I haven't heard or seen any official visit regarding upholding the learners' rights at our school."* P5 added *"No, they do not monitor or support schools. I have never experienced that."* As a result, schools frequently find it difficult to uphold regular procedures for addressing infractions or for encouraging moral behaviour.

This finding is consistent with the PPCT models' contextual and institutional elements, which emphasize the value of supportive structures in promoting developmental processes. When oversight and support are lacking, the safeguarding of learners' dignity becomes uneven and largely depends on individual teachers.

In summation, the elements influencing teachers are in defending the right to the human dignity of learners in schools. Teachers' efficacy is hampered by a constrained curriculum, a lack of institutional support, inadequate training, and a lack of legal understanding. These components show how systemic, contextual, and personal factors interact to influence teachers' ability to uphold and safeguard learners' dignity from the standpoint of the PPCT model. In order to ensure that every learner's right to dignity is respected in South African schools, policymakers and educational leaders can create more effective strategies by comprehending these complexities. Some of these strategies include improving institutional monitoring, updating content, improving teacher training, and raising legal awareness.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been proposed to strengthen the safeguarding of the right to human dignity of learners in schools:

Enhancing Awareness and Advocacy on Legal Frameworks Recognizing Human Dignity

The Department of Basic Education is advised to initiate a comprehensive awareness and advocacy campaign focused on legal frameworks that recognize learners' rights to human dignity. The campaign should be implemented in collaboration with the relevant district functionaries to ensure consistency and effectiveness across all schools in the Bojanala District. The goal of this initiative is to ensure that all schools are adequately informed about and understand the legal rules that uphold and protect students' rights to human dignity. Clearly outlining the legal requirements and standards set out by national laws and policies should be a major component of the campaign. By establishing these guidelines, the

Department can ensure that teachers, schools, and administrators understand their roles in protecting students' dignity and can implement them successfully in the classroom.

Intensifying Continuous Professional Development for Teachers

Continuous, organized teacher development programs must be implemented to enhance instructors' capacity to defend students' human dignity. All instructors should be required to participate in these programs, which should cover both broader human rights teaching techniques and modules and content centered on students' human dignity.

The development program's design should encourage teachers to actively participate in these sessions, enabling them to earn professional points toward certification. Additionally, district officials must regularly visit schools to assess how teachers implement procedures that respect students' human rights. Professional development will be translated into significant classroom activity with the support of the follow-ups.

Integrating the National School Curriculum with the right to human dignity of learners. To protect students' human dignity, relevant content must be included in the national school curriculum. The curriculum developers for the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should conduct a thorough needs analysis for each subject to identify gaps and ensure that information on students' rights to human dignity is fairly and consistently incorporated across all pertinent subject areas.

Learner-Teacher Support Materials (LTSM) should be developed based on this research to foster a robust culture of human rights education. To enable efficient distribution and implementation at the school level, education officials must also ensure that these resources are delivered to every school on schedule.

Strengthening Monitoring and Support

To supervise the implementation and protect students' right to human dignity in schools, the DBE should establish a specialized monitoring and support team. The monitoring procedure should assess whether educators meet the required criteria and whether school policies are routinely updated to include human rights education initiatives that reduce breaches of students' rights to human dignity.
Ongoing monitoring enables quick identification of the difficulties teachers face and the provision of appropriate assistance and remedies. Moreover, school management teams (SMTs) should be held accountable for ensuring that their schools uphold and protect learners' dignity actively in daily practices.

By implementing these recommendations, the Bojanala District can make significant progress towards realizing and sustaining the safeguarding of the' right to the human dignity of learners systematically. This approach will help ensure that all learners, regardless of race, colour, gender, cultural background, religion, or socio-economic status receive equitable and quality education within a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to a selection of schools within the Bojanala District, and therefore, its findings are specific to these schools and may not be generalized to all schools within the province or beyond. However, the knowledge acquired may still be useful as a reference point for stakeholders and educational authorities in similar contexts. Given these limitations, the researcher recommends that future studies conduct longitudinal analyses to track changes over time and further explore this issue using different theoretical frameworks. Such investigations could shed light on the broader structural and systemic influences that shape the protection of human dignity for learners across diverse educational settings.

Conclusion

The goal of the study was to investigate the obstacles that ordinary public schools face in defending leaners rights to human dignity in classroom contexts. The results show that systemic limitations operating at various levels within the educational system affect this process. In particular, the dynamic interplay between Department of Basic Education (DBE) employees, teachers at different post levels, the national curriculum, educational regulations, and the larger schooling setting shapes the maintenance of learners' right to human dignity.

The main impediments identified include:

- Lack of legal knowledge regarding the protection of learners' right to human dignity;
- Inadequate teacher development opportunities;
- Limited curriculum integration of human dignity concepts; and
- Insufficient monitoring and support from DBE functionaries.

Our findings indicate that ordinary public primary school teachers in the Bojanala District face significant challenges in upholding learners' right to human dignity. Therefore, continued efforts are required to align teachers' practices with both national and international legal frameworks and departmental policy expectations on human dignity. Ultimately, this study contributes valuable knowledge on how teachers can effectively uphold the safeguarding of the right to human dignity of learners in ways that promote fairness, equity, and quality education for all learners in public ordinary primary schools across the Bojanala District.

Abbreviations

PPCT: Process-Person-Context-time

DBE: Department of Basic Education

ATP: Annual Teaching Plans

LTSM: Learner-Teacher Support Materials

Declarations

Authors Contributions

This draft paper was developed from the **first author's final doctoral thesis in Education,** which is currently being supervised by the **second author.** The **conceptualization of the paper** was a collaborative effort between both authors. The **first author** prepared the initial draft under the **guidance and supervision of the second author,** after which the **second author refined and further developed the paper**.

In the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized DeepSeek AI as an assistive tool. Its application was strictly limited to enhancing the writing process, including paraphrasing for clarity, generating structural outlines, and identifying potential gaps in logic. The authors affirm that all critical thinking, analysis, and interpretation of data are the result of human intellectual effort, and the author assumes full responsibility for the entire content of this work.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study

Data Availability Statement

Data can be provided upon request

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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