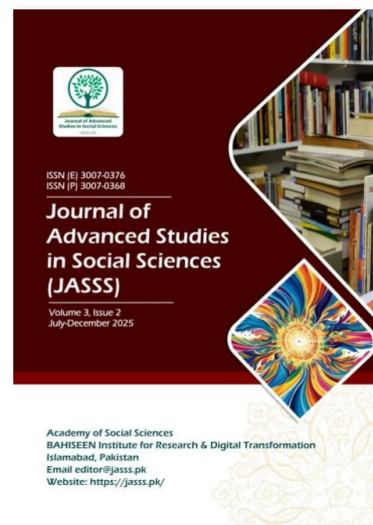


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Exploring the Lived Experiences of South Africa Council for Educators Investigators on Sexual Offences and Corporal Punishment

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of South African Council for Educators (SACE) investigators handling cases of sexual offences and corporal punishment in schools. These investigators play a crucial role in promoting ethical conduct among educators and safeguarding learners from abuse. Guided by the transformative paradigm and the “Inside Out” socio-ecological model, the study sought to understand the personal, institutional, and systemic challenges influencing investigators’ effectiveness and well-being. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 investigators drawn from six provinces. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke’s (2021) framework, with NVivo software aiding in data organization and coding. Findings revealed ten interconnected themes: lack of parental cooperation, security risks for investigators, protection of accused educators by school leadership, intimidation of learners, inadequate training, persistence of corporal punishment, limited preventive outreach, poor inter-agency collaboration, weaknesses in SACE systems, and excessive workloads impacting investigator well-being. These challenges illustrate the complex socio-ecological environment within which SACE investigators operate, marked by institutional constraints, community-level resistance, and insufficient psychosocial and professional support. The study concludes that investigator effectiveness is undermined by systemic and organizational shortcomings. It recommends trauma-informed training, improved safety measures, inter-agency collaboration, and institutional well-being programs to enhance investigative practice. Strengthening SACE’s administrative systems, alongside continuous community outreach

and preventive education, is critical for fostering accountability, promoting ethical teaching practices, and ensuring learner protection in South African schools.

Keywords: SACE investigators, sexual offences, corporal punishment, transformative paradigm, qualitative case study, socio-ecological model, child protection

Introduction

Investigating cases on corporal and sexual offences is complex. The South African Council for Educators (SACE) plays a pivotal role in upholding ethical teaching practices and ensuring a safe learning environment for learners. Investigators within SACE handle cases involving serious violations, such as sexual offenses and corporal punishment, both of which have long-term physical and psychological impacts on learner. As such investigators are likely to be facing challenges such as psychological trauma and other related challenges as they carry out their duties. Mitchell, et al (2024) contend that investigators of child sexual abuse cases are more likely to experience mental health issues, such as fatigue. A study conducted by Padilla, et al (2024) revealed that investigators face stress due to heavy caseloads, exposure to trauma and involvement with other criminal actors. Huey and Kalyal (2017) argue that investigators dealing with mental health issues are likely to experience vicarious trauma emotional issues. They go further to highlight that investigators deal with their own emotions and those of the victims and their families. Huey and Kalyal (2017) also found that as officers conduct these investigations their wellbeing is being affected. This therefore show that investigation is not an easy task.

Kocsis et al. (2002) also noted that the investigators' lack of the necessary abilities was a problem. Investigators may experience stress and trauma because of their lack of investigation abilities. They also examined the value of expertise in research in their study. This implies that inexperienced investigators are more prone than seasoned investigators to suffer from trauma, stress, emotions, and other negative consequences. According to BCPI and Sonne (2006), to be a successful investigator, one must receive training. Therefore, investigators require training on how to handle their emotions and debriefing. In addition to emotions, Muthini (2018) suggest that investigators need more specialised training on how to handle, package, transport, and store materials from crime scenes.

In the past investigation involved inflicting pain on perceived perpetrators. This paused a challenge to the investigators as some perceived perpetrators got injured or died in the process (Muthini, 2018). With the advent of human rights this method of investigation is no longer permissible. Since SACE is a civil organisation, its investigators are not permitted to use force to get information from perpetrators. The role of investigation is to establish whether the offence was committed or not. This is a huge task on the part of the investigators. The investigation that involves children is even complicated. Emberg, et al (2020) argue that cases of suspected sexual abuse can be difficult to investigate and prosecute, particularly when a young child is involved. The advent of technology has brought another complication to investigators. Sometimes the evidence might be stored in computers or cell phones. Getting access to these gadgets need legal authorisation and technical expertise. Ladapo, (2011) cite unforthcoming informants, corruption, funding, lack of training and poor record keeping as some of the challenges faced by investigators. de la Fuente Vilar (2019) contends that an investigation becomes more complicated when interviewees are uncooperative and have communication difficulties. This is likely with SACE investigators as language can be a

barrier in a multilingual country like South Africa. Looking at the challenges experienced by investigators, this study wishes to explore the experiences of SACE investigators with the aim of suggesting programmes that can be put in place to make SACE investigators work better with minimal challenges. This study will also contribute to the body of knowledge as in South Africa there is dearth of literature about investigation done by civilians like SACE investigators. Sollie, et al (2014) posit that many studies have focused on the wellbeing of police officers, there are few studies focusing on investigators especially civilian investigators.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of SACE investigators on sexual offences and corporal punishment?
2. What programmes can be put in place to support SACE investigators?

Literature Review

Experiences of Investigators

Investigators of professional misconduct in schools among educators face challenges as they conduct their duties. An investigation is initiated when an offence has been committed. The purpose of the investigation is to determine whether the offence was committed. At SACE investigators are commissioned when schools report sexual and corporal cases to them. Investigators may face challenges as they conduct their duties. Sollie et al (2017) cite long and irregular working hours, confrontations with children's suffering, administrative accumulation, decision making, and driving long distances to access schools as very stressful. Other challenges may include systematic barriers such as bureaucratic delays, inadequate resources and lack of training on the part of investigators. This impacts the effectiveness of the investigation (Powell, et al 2013). Numerous health conditions, including depression, burnout, compassion fatigue, and posttraumatic stress disorder, are linked to the operational and organisational pressures of investigators (Gershon et al, 2009). Chae and Boyle (2013) associate investigation work with suicide, drug abuse, and divorce. On the other hand, Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) argue that cultural attitudes towards discipline and authority often conflict with legal frameworks further compromising the work of the investigators. In South Africa there are some parents who still believe in corporal punishment. These parents may not cooperate when cases of corporal punishment are being investigated. According to Pavsic Mrevlje (2016), investigators are exposed to death. In South Africa buying hit men (inkabi) to eliminate those who are perceived a threat is common. SACE investigators may not be spared from such threats. Kelty and Gordon (2015) cite understaffing as another challenge in case investigation as it leads to additional shifts. According to Pavsic Mrevlje (2016) and Kelty and Gordon (2015), persistent exposure to various cases can have negative psychological effects like compassion fatigue and burnout on the investigators.

Programmes that can be Put in Place to Support SACE Investigators

The above section identified the experiences of investigators. In this section we look at some of the programmes of intervention strategies that can be put in place to make the work of investigators easier. According to Sollie et al. (2017), the stress of investigations can be reduced by using rigors mind control, visualisation, empathy and responsibility sharing, sensemaking, and avoiding potentially upsetting work environments. Similarly, Vivona (2014) feels support from colleagues can play an important role in assisting investigators to cope with

stress. Christensen et al (2021) suggest use of risk assessment prioritization, resourced investigators and collaborative partnerships as strategies that can yield to positive results when investigating child sexual offences. Yadav et al (2023) further suggest the use of AI tools during investigation. AI tools will assist in speeding up the investigation. Bull and Rachlew (2019) and Westera et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of pre-interview preparation in developing an investigative mindset, which subsequently impacts the interviewing techniques available to investigators. This suggests that effective preparation is vital for investigators, as it enables them to identify any gaps before the investigation begins. Chin et al. (2024) found a negative correlation between interview outcomes and accusatory interviewing methods. This highlights the need for investigators to adopt a positive approach in their work. Additionally, intimidation should be used cautiously during interviews. Chin et al. (2024) advocate for rapport-based interviews with perpetrators as a more effective strategy.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by “Inside out” social ecological model of policy and environmental change. The "Inside Out" socio-ecological model of policy and environmental change provides a comprehensive framework to explore the lived experiences of South Africa Council of Educators (SACE) investigators dealing with sexual offences and corporal punishment (Golden, et al 2015). This model highlights the dynamic interplay between individuals and the broader systems influencing their experiences, emphasizing how policies and environmental factors shape and are shaped by individual and collective behaviours. By applying the "Inside Out" socio-ecological model, the study systematically examines how individual experiences of SACE investigators are embedded within and influenced by broader systemic factors (Golden, et al 2015). The model provides a structured lens to: Explore the investigators' personal and professional challenges (Individual Level), Analyse the impact of interpersonal dynamics and collaboration (Interpersonal Level), Assess organizational effectiveness and support systems within SACE (Organizational Level), Investigate the influence of community attitudes and cultural norms on investigative processes (Community Level) and Critique the role of policy and systemic structures in shaping investigative practices and outcomes (Policy and Environmental Level).

Paradigm

This study was guided by a transformative paradigm, which emphasized social justice, empowerment, and the amplification of marginalized voices (Mertens, 2019). The paradigm was appropriate because it sought to understand and challenge institutional and systemic inequities that shaped the lived realities of South African Council for Educators (SACE) investigators. By situating the study within this paradigm, the research aimed not only to describe investigators' experiences but also to contribute toward improving institutional responses to educator misconduct and learner protection.

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of SACE investigators. Qualitative inquiry allowed for the exploration of complex, contextually embedded phenomena that could not be fully captured through quantitative measures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach facilitated the generation of rich, descriptive data that reflected participants' meanings, emotions, and interpretations of their professional realities.

Research Design

The study adopted a case study design, which enabled an in-depth investigation of a bounded system in this case, the professional experiences of SACE investigators handling educator misconduct and abuse cases (Yin, 2018). The case study design was well suited to uncovering detailed and holistic understandings of participants' contexts, processes, and challenges. It allowed the researcher to analyze multiple perspectives and the interplay between institutional structures and individual experiences.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used to identify and recruit participants who possessed relevant experience and insights into the phenomenon under study (Leavy, 2022). Twenty SACE investigators from six provinces were selected to ensure diversity in geographical representation and experience levels. Participants were chosen based on their involvement in investigating educator misconduct cases, as they could provide rich, first-hand accounts of the challenges and supports encountered in their work.

Data Generation Methods

Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility to probe emerging issues while maintaining focus on key themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews allowed participants to share detailed narratives about their daily experiences, ethical dilemmas, safety concerns, and institutional support structures. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details and nonverbal cues that enriched data interpretation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved identifying, coding, and interpreting patterns of meaning across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process followed six iterative steps: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo software was used to manage data systematically and enhance the transparency and rigor of the analytical process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study in accordance with institutional and national research ethics standards (BERA, 2018). Participants were fully informed about the study's aims, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing identifying information and securely storing data. Given the potential for emotional distress during discussions of sensitive cases, two members of the research team who were registered therapists were available to provide immediate psychological support when required. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board before data collection commenced.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1

Summary of Findings and Supporting Excerpts

Theme	Description / Discussion	Supporting Excerpts from Participants
1. Lack of Cooperation from Parents	Many parents showed reluctance or demanded compensation to participate in investigations. This lack of cooperation undermines disciplinary processes and learner protection. According to the “Inside Out” socio-ecological model (Golden et al., 2015), such community-level barriers hinder systemic effectiveness.	<i>“Parents don’t want to participate in such matters. Or they participate, hoping they will receive money after that.”</i>
2. Security Risks for Investigators	Investigators faced safety threats when working in high-risk or unfamiliar areas, often without adequate institutional protection. Similar patterns have been found among professionals in high-crime contexts (Boonzaaier et al., 2021).	<i>“We go to places that we don't even know.” / “Our branded cars make us visible targets.”</i>
Protection of Accused Educators by School Leadership	Some school principals obstructed investigations, protecting accused educators and prioritizing school reputation over learner safety. This mirrors findings by Nixon et al. (2020) and Sammut (2022) on institutional complicity.	<i>“The principal told me, you can’t proceed without my consent.”</i>
4. Intimidation of Learners by Accused Educators	Learners were often intimidated or coerced into withdrawing statements. Power dynamics and fear of retaliation silenced victims (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). Independent learner support systems are therefore essential.	<i>“The learner during investigation is willing to give you all the information ... but on the day of the hearing, they won’t want to proceed.”</i>
5. Inadequate Training of Investigators	Investigators lacked sufficient training, particularly in child-sensitive interviewing and trauma-informed approaches. Similar gaps are noted in prior literature (Figley, 2013).	<i>“SACE did not equip the investigators, especially the new ones.”</i>
6. Persistence of Corporal Punishment	Corporal punishment remains prevalent despite being banned. This reflects defiance and deep-rooted cultural norms (Mahlangu et al., 2021). Continuous training and enforcement are necessary.	<i>“Educators act like they are not informed.”</i>
7. Lack of Outreach and Preventive Education	Participants emphasized the need for proactive ethics and awareness workshops. Preventive approaches enhance accountability and reduce misconduct (SACE, 2020; Waples et al., 2009; Marusic, 2016; Benson, 2023).	<i>“Maybe I feel like we should do more workshops.”</i>
8. Poor Inter-Agency Collaboration	Fragmented coordination among SACE, DBE, SAPS, and social services limits response effectiveness. Consistent with Hale et al.	<i>“The collaboration is not there ... it’s a problem.”</i>

	(2024) and DSD (2017), strong inter-sectoral collaboration is essential for protecting learners.	
9. Weaknesses in SACE Systems	Weak monitoring, poor data systems, and lenient certification erode regulatory credibility. Evaluations (SACE, 2018; DBE, 2019) urge digitization and tighter vetting to prevent re-employment of offenders.	<i>“Our system, I would say we don’t have a system.”</i>
10. Workload and Well-being of Investigators	Excessive workloads and limited psychosocial support lead to burnout. This aligns with secondary traumatic stress literature (Figley, 1995; Bride, 2007), suggesting the need for wellness programs and workload management.	<i>“You can travel today to the Eastern Cape and come back the following day ... but you must be here still.”</i>

The findings of this study illuminate the complex realities, challenges, and institutional gaps experienced by investigators handling educator misconduct and abuse cases within South African schools. Participants shared candid accounts that reveal systemic, organizational, and psychosocial constraints that compromise the effectiveness of their work and the protection of vulnerable learners. Ten overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) lack of cooperation from parents, (2) security risks for investigators, (3) protection of accused educators by school leadership, (4) intimidation of learners by accused educators, (5) inadequate training of investigators, (6) persistence of corporal punishment, (7) lack of outreach and preventive education, (8) poor inter-agency collaboration, (9) weaknesses in SACE systems, and (10) workload and well-being of investigators. Each of these themes is discussed below in relation to participants’ narratives and the broader literature.

1. Lack of Cooperation from Parents

Participants highlighted the challenge of limited parental cooperation, with some parents refusing to participate or expecting monetary incentives. As one investigator noted, *“parents don’t want to participate in such matters. Or they participate, hoping they will receive money after that.”* Such reluctance undermines disciplinary processes and the protection of learners. Guided by the “Inside Out” socio-ecological model of policy and environmental change (Golden et al., 2015), these findings illustrate how barriers at the interpersonal and community levels such as mistrust, socioeconomic hardship, and weak institutional relationships intersect to affect the functioning of disciplinary systems. The model emphasizes that individual behaviours and systemic outcomes are mutually.

2. Security Risks for Investigators

Investigators reported significant safety concerns when visiting unfamiliar or hostile environments. *“We go to places that we don’t even know,”* one participant explained, while another noted that branded vehicles made them visible targets. These findings resonate with research by Boonzaaier et al., (2021) who found that professionals investigating sensitive cases in communities with high crime rates face personal safety risks and limited institutional protection. Addressing these concerns requires improved risk assessment and safety protocols for investigators.

3. Protection of Accused Educators by School Leadership

Several participants described instances where school principals protected accused educators, obstructing investigations. *“The principal told me, you can’t proceed without my consent,”* one investigator recalled. Such gatekeeping reflects entrenched loyalty networks and the misuse of authority within school hierarchies. Studies by Nixon, et al (2020) and Sammut (2022) similarly identified institutional complicity as a barrier to accountability, where school leaders prioritize reputational management over learner safety.

4. Intimidation of Learners by Accused Educators

Participants expressed concern about learners being threatened or coerced into silence. As one noted, *“the learner during investigation is willing to give you all the information ... but on the day of the hearing, they won’t want to proceed.”* This echoes research by Furlong and Morrison (2000), showing that power dynamics in schools can silence victims, especially when perpetrators occupy trusted positions. Effective safeguarding therefore requires independent support systems for learners during disciplinary proceedings.

5. Inadequate Training of Investigators

The lack of specialized training was another recurrent theme. *“SACE did not equip the investigators, especially the new ones,”* one participant stated. Investigators often felt unprepared to interview children or handle trauma-sensitive cases. Similar gaps have been identified in prior studies emphasizing the importance of trauma-informed investigative approaches (Figley, 2013). Training programs should thus incorporate psychological, legal, and ethical competencies tailored to child protection contexts.

6. Persistence of Corporal Punishment

Despite legal prohibitions, corporal punishment remains widespread. *“Educators act like they are not informed,”* one investigator explained, reflecting defiance and cultural normalization. According to the study by Mahlangu et al (2021) corporal punishment persists in South African schools due to factors such as low socio-economic status, school climate, and home environments that perpetuate the acceptance of physical correction. These findings highlight the urgent need for ongoing professional development and stricter enforcement of child protection legislation

7. Lack of Outreach and Preventive Education

Participants called for increased outreach and preventive education. *“Maybe I feel like we should do more workshops,”* one suggested. This aligns with literature emphasizing proactive measures in teacher professionalization (SACE, 2020). Preventive strategies, such as ethics workshops and awareness campaigns, have been shown to reduce misconduct and reinforce a culture of accountability. For instance, a study by Waples et al., (2009) emphasizes the importance of proactive ethics education to prevent ethical misconduct in organizations. Similarly, Marusic (2016) discusses various activities, including training programs, designed to reduce research misconduct and encourage integrity. Additionally, Benson (2023) presents a model for preventing academic misconduct, highlighting the effectiveness of required ethics modules in fostering a culture of academic integrity.

8. Poor Inter-Agency Collaboration

Weak collaboration among key stakeholders including SACE, the Department of Education, SAPS, and social development was widely cited. *“The collaboration is not there ... it’s a problem,”* one participant lamented. Such fragmentation reflects structural silos that hinder the integrated child protection approach advocated by the Department of Social Development (2017). Research by Hale et al. (2024) stresses that inter-sectoral collaboration is essential for timely, coordinated responses to abuse.

9. Weaknesses in SACE Systems

Participants criticized weaknesses in the SACE administrative system, citing issues such as the issuance of “letters of good standing” to non-compliant educators. *“Our system, I would say we don’t have a system,”* one investigator said. Weak monitoring mechanisms undermine SACE’s regulatory credibility. Previous evaluations (SACE, 2018; Department of Basic Education, 2019) have similarly called for digitization and tighter vetting systems to prevent repeat offenders from re-entering classrooms.

10. Workload and Well-being of Investigators

Lastly, participants described overwhelming workloads and insufficient psychosocial support. *“You can travel today to the Eastern Cape and come back the following day ... but you must be here still,”* one explained. This heavy workload contributes to burnout and emotional fatigue, echoing findings from secondary traumatic stress research (Figley, 1995; Bride, 2007). Institutional well-being programs and staff rotation could mitigate such strain and enhance investigative efficacy. Causes are allowed to accumulate making it very difficult to handle them when they are too many. attending to them as they are reported is ideal.

Conclusions

This study concludes that investigator effectiveness in handling educator misconduct and abuse cases in South African schools is severely compromised by intertwined systemic, institutional, and psychosocial challenges. The findings reveal that weak parental cooperation, security threats, institutional protection of perpetrators, and learner intimidation collectively undermine the pursuit of justice and learner protection. Furthermore, investigators’ inadequate training, high workloads, and insufficient psychosocial support limit their capacity to conduct thorough, trauma-sensitive investigations. The persistence of corporal punishment, poor inter-agency collaboration, and inefficiencies within SACE systems reflect broader governance and accountability gaps within the education sector. These findings affirm that the current disciplinary framework is fragmented and reactive, lacking preventive and supportive mechanisms to ensure ethical conduct and child safety. A comprehensive, collaborative, and capacity-strengthening approach is thus essential to enhance institutional responsiveness and safeguard learner welfare.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that SACE, the Department of Basic Education, and partner agencies adopt a multi-pronged strategy to strengthen investigative and preventive mechanisms. First, specialized, trauma-informed training programs should be institutionalized to equip investigators with psychological, legal, and ethical competencies for handling sensitive cases. Second, robust safety and support

systems must be implemented to protect investigators and learners from intimidation and retaliation. Third, digitization and system reforms within SACE are essential to improve case tracking, vetting, and accountability processes. Additionally, enhanced collaboration between SACE, SAPS, social services, and schools should be prioritized through formal inter-agency protocols. Continuous outreach, ethics workshops, and community engagement initiatives can foster parental cooperation and promote a culture of integrity in schools. Finally, institutional well-being programs and manageable caseloads should be introduced to mitigate investigator burnout and sustain effective service delivery.

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