

Safety and security challenges of scholar transport in South Africa: An overview



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Background: In South Africa, the provision of transport services for learners is crucial for educational access. Although there are policies and legislation designed to ensure the safety and security of learners, numerous problems persist within scholar transport in South Africa.

Objectives: The purpose of this study is to understand the provision of scholar transport infrastructure and services in South Africa.

Method: This study employed a comprehensive desktop review methodology to scrutinise both scientific and non-academic (grey) literature, aiming to elucidate the complexities surrounding scholar transport in South Africa.

Results: The study found widespread reports of reckless driving, unroadworthy vehicles, inappropriate vehicles and traffic accidents involving scholar transport. In addition to safety concerns, the study revealed issues of crime, corruption and mismanagement of funds for scholar transport. These issues often leave disadvantaged learners stranded, vulnerable or worse, dead.

Conclusion: The study reveals a complex interplay between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities, marked by inadequacies in legislation, compliance and enforcement. There is a gap between policy frameworks and their implementation, highlighting a need for a holistic approach to address these challenges.

Contribution: This article contributes to the scholarly understanding of transport dynamics in educational access and the geographies of South African children, offering insights into the logistical, safety and security challenges inherent in scholar transport.

Keywords: scholar transport; safety; accidents; transport associations; learners; transport infrastructure.

Introduction

In the post-apartheid era, South Africa embraced a rights-based legal culture, positioning access to basic education as a fundamental right within its Bill of Rights 29(1) (Bell & McKay 2011). However, the realisation of the right to education is contingent upon the provision of reliable, safe and affordable transportation. While the Bill of Rights explicitly addresses access to education as a right, it does not explicitly list transport as a basic right. The absence of explicit recognition of the right to transport can be perceived as a gap in addressing the broader context of socio-economic rights. Despite existing policies and legislation aimed at ensuring the safety and security of scholar transport, numerous challenges persist, undermining the system's effectiveness and efficiency. This study undertakes a thorough examination of both scientific and grey literature to dissect the multifaceted issues plaguing scholar transport (Manyaka & Mathebula 2020; Mngaza, Dhlamini & Van Zyl 2001).

According to the National Household Travel Survey of 2020, a significant 37% of all household trips are for educational purposes, encompassing both school and tertiary institution commutes. This highlights the educational commute as a major transport challenge in South Africa, contributing to issues such as congestion and air pollution. Several factors drive educational commutes in South Africa. Initially, the extensive urban sprawl characteristic of South Africa's urban areas (Horn 2018; Marais, Denoon-Stevens & Cloete 2020) plays a role. Additionally, the legacy of apartheid's spatial planning and segregated educational systems remains a factor. Historically, people of colour were forced to live in peripheral areas; now, to access better-resourced schools (formerly reserved for white children), families either face expensive relocation or choose the far cheaper option of long commutes (McKay 2019). The design of urban areas prioritising vehicular transport further worsens the problem (Sefotho 2024). Consequently, South Africa has some of the longest school commutes in the world (Rammuki 2018).

The state of educational commuting in South Africa is further strained by the acute scarcity of adequate, reliable and affordable public transportation options like light rail, buses and trains (Luke 2018). By the 1960s, spatial apartheid combined with urban sprawl began to undermine the ability of public transport to be financially sustainable. Additionally, the post-apartheid regime has overseen a rapid decline in the availability, access and affordability of public transport (Cooke, Behrens & Zuidgeest 2018; McKay, Simpson & Patel 2017). Today, most commuters rely on private vehicles or semi-formal, partially regulated minibus taxis. This leaves learners particularly vulnerable (Nala 2020); they lack choice, have little political voice and must either risk long commutes via these limited transport options or forgo school entirely (Ndlovu 2018). While some learners are homeschooled, attend online schools or walk significant distances – especially in rural areas and townships (Dlamini, Maharaj & Dunn 2021; Goosen and Van der Merwe 2015; Mgushelo 2018; Muthige 2023), this does not change the systemic challenges for most learners.

Therefore, an understanding of the complex nature of school commuting is crucial if South Africa is to ensure learners have access to school. The aim of the study is to understand the provision of scholar transport infrastructure and services in South Africa. To achieve the aim of the study, three objectives were formulated:

- To identify the challenges associated with the provision of scholar transport.
- To understand the safety and security of learners using scholar transport.
- To determine operational challenges of scholar transport.

This research contributes to discourse regarding access to education, transport dynamics and children's geographies.

Contextualising scholar transport in South Africa

The spatial legacy of apartheid spatial planning in South Africa, with segregated 'townships' on the urban peripheries, left people of colour geographically isolated from employment and essential services (Kerr 2017). Inadequate public transport further marginalised these communities, creating the conditions for the informal minibus taxi industry to emerge (Morris 1990; Thomas 2016; Vegter 2020). Subsequently, when the once 'white' schools opened to all races, under the De Klerk government, the minibus taxi industry emerged as a critical role player enabling learners of colour to access these 'white' schools located in 'white' residential areas (De Kadt et al. 2011; Van Niekerk et al. 2017).

The minibus taxi industry now dominates the scholar transport sector (Behrens & Muchaka 2011; Eagle & Kwele 2021; Manuel & Naidoo 2021; McKay 2019). Although the scholar transport industry is male dominated, the research done by Mulaudzi and Schachtebeck (2022) indicates a growing presence of women entrepreneurs in the industry.

While scholar transport plays a critical role in transporting school children to and from school, parents of learners using private school transport are often confronted with school transport challenges (Baloyi 2023). The scholar transport industry is largely characterised by operational inconsistencies, unethical practices and frequent road accidents, thereby placing learners at risk. Learners are transported in unroadworthy and poorly maintained vehicles (Van Eck, Wassermann & Van der Merwe 2023). These issues represent only a fraction of the broader challenges within the scholar transport industry. The safety and security of scholar transport remain a critical and pressing issue in South Africa that requires further investigation and urgent attention (Rathogwa 2024; Shuro & Waggie 2024). For some learners, physical and geographical barriers, such as long distances, harsh weather conditions and inadequate transportation services, impede access to educational opportunities (Hitge 2018; Nala 2020). In these circumstances, scholar transport services emerge as a critical intervention, promoting educational equity. As noted by Manyaka and Mathebula (2020), developing countries are increasingly providing scholar transport to improve access to school.

While scholar transport was initially marginalised and received little official attention, this changed with the implementation of the National Learner Transport Policy (Department of Transport 2015) and other scholar transport programmes aimed at improving the safety of scholars on transport, such as the Discovery Safe Journey to School (DSJTS) and the Shayela Programme (Mngaza et al. 2001). These initiatives led to the launch of government-funded transport services provided to disadvantaged learners who live more than 5 km from school, including learners in remote or rural areas, learners with disabilities and disadvantaged learners (Department of Transport 2015). However, eligibility criteria for government-funded transport services may vary between provinces.

The National Learner Transport Policy (Department of Transport 2015) draws on the White Paper on National Transport Policy (Department of Transport 2021), the *National Road Traffic Act (No. 93 of 1996)* (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1996), the National Land Transport Strategic Framework (Department of Transport 2023), *The Children's Act 2005 Act (No. 38 of 2005)* (RSA 2005), and the National Development Plan. Additionally, it sought to integrate learner transport with the public transport system. Safety standards for learner transport vehicles and drivers were adopted and include regular inspections, vehicle maintenance, driver training and licensing requirements. The National Learner Transport Policy (Department of Transport 2015) is, however, constrained by implementation challenges, funding shortfalls and capacity issues. Although the National Land Transport Strategic Framework does not directly dictate specific scholar transport policies, it shapes the context and direction of the sector. For example, it provides a guiding framework prioritising accessibility, safety and integration of scholar transport.

Theoretical framework

This study employs the concept of the implementation gap to assess safety and security challenges within scholar transport in South Africa. The implementation gap is a concept widely used in public administration, governance and policy analysis research (Abdullahi & Othman 2021; Arteaga et al. 2024; Hudson, Hunter & Peckham 2019). In the context of scholar transport, the implementation gap refers to the disconnect between policies and legislation designed to govern scholar transport and their practical execution. The concept addresses why policies, despite being well formulated, often fail to achieve their intended goals during implementation (Pressman & Wildavsky 1973; Sabatier & Mazmanian 1980). Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) posit that policy implementation is rarely straightforward and that significant gaps often exist between policy objectives and their eventual outcomes. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) provide foundational insights into challenges of policy implementation, for example, insufficient resources, lack of institutional capacity, poor communication among stakeholders, resistance to change and inadequate monitoring mechanisms.

The policies that guide scholar transport often aim to address critical issues such as vehicle roadworthiness, driver competence and accessibility; however, their implementation is challenging because of various factors. Implementation challenges begin with policy design, where ambitious goals may not always align with on-the-ground realities. For example, limited infrastructure and financial resource constraints. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) argue that even well-designed policies can falter because of complexities involved in execution, such as unforeseen circumstances, conflicting interests among implementers and resistance from stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement is essential in scholar transport. The successful implementation of safety measures requires collaboration between different stakeholders such as transport operators, school authorities, parents and government bodies. However, miscommunication and conflicting priorities often create challenges.

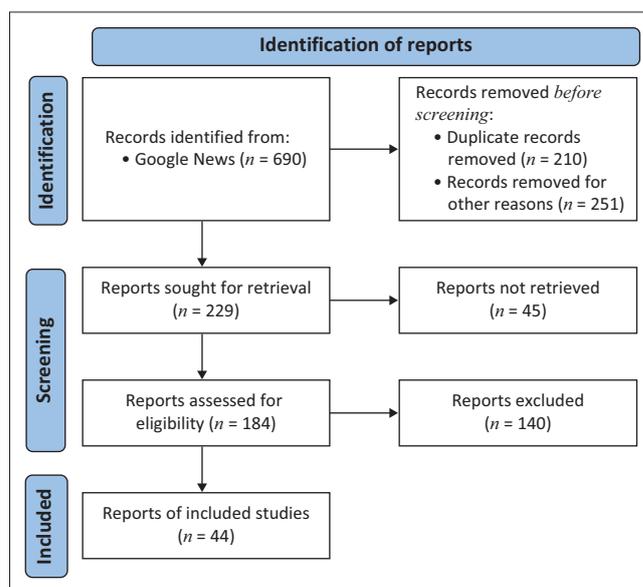
A lack of funding for law enforcement, driver training programmes and modernised vehicles can disproportionately affect underprivileged communities, leaving learners more vulnerable to unsafe travel conditions. At the operational level, execution challenges such as non-compliance with traffic laws, unlicensed drivers and poorly maintained vehicles continue to undermine policy efforts. These issues are exacerbated by weak monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, which fail to hold transport providers accountable. Contextual factors unique to South Africa, such as socio-economic inequalities, crime prevalence and long travel distances, create an environment where safety risks are amplified, and the implementation of regulations becomes even more difficult (Mtizi 2017). Understanding the implementation gap in this context allows for a systematic examination of why policies fail to achieve their intended outcomes, despite their critical importance.

Research methodology

This study employed a comprehensive desktop review methodology to scrutinise both scientific and non-academic (grey) literature, aiming to elucidate the complexities surrounding scholar transport in South Africa. The scientific literature was searched through established databases, including ScienceDirect, PubMed, Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science. However, scientific literature on scholar transport, particularly within the South African context, was limited. For example, the phrase 'learner transport South Africa' on Google Scholar listed only 18 studies, almost all in either conference papers or student dissertations.

In this study, grey literature includes newspaper articles, industry reports, professional association websites, policies and government documents. The search for grey literature was mainly conducted using the Google search engine with various keywords related to the topic. The key search terms used include 'scholar transport', 'learner transport', 'scholar transport accidents' and 'scholar transport in South Africa'. Materials included in this study were those providing insights into scholar transport policies, challenges, accidents and similar issues. The newspaper articles selected were from 2010 to 2024. To ensure rigour and transparency in the selection of newspaper articles, a PRISMA flow diagram was adapted to illustrate the structured search, screening and selection procedures employed. Figure 1 shows an adapted PRISMA flow diagram for newspaper article search.

The inclusion criteria were stringent, focusing exclusively on content that directly pertains to scholar transport services or issues intimately linked to the South African context, thereby ensuring the relevance and specificity of the literature compiled for this review. By incorporating newspaper articles,



Source: Page, M.J., McKenzie, J.E., Bossuyt, P.M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T.C., Mulrow, C.D. et al., 2021, 'The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews', *BMJ* 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>

FIGURE 1: Adapted PRISMA flow diagram for newspaper article search.

policy documents and other non-academic sources, this research expands the knowledge base on scholar transport beyond scientific literature. Moreover, the inclusion of grey literature, which is often overlooked in academic research, provides valuable insights from a wide range of perspectives; hence, it enriches the overall understandings of scholar transport in the context of South Africa. While newspapers are valuable sources of information, one of the limitations is biasness and sensationalism to attract readership. To address this limitation, the study complemented newspaper articles with scientific literature.

Data analysis

The first stage was data analysis of grey literature. A systematic content analysis of grey literature, specifically newspaper articles published between 2010 and 2024, was undertaken because of the limited availability of scientific literature addressing scholar transport issues directly in the South African context. Newspaper articles provided rich and contextually relevant insights, highlighting actual events, incidents, stakeholder perspectives and immediate management and policy responses. The analysis followed the following steps: (1) data familiarisation, (2) thematic identification and coding, (3) synthesis of findings and (4) analysis and interpretation.

The second stage of data analysis was to integrate scientific literature into the analysis of scholar transport. Because of the initial scarcity of scientific literature directly addressing scholar transport in South Africa, scientific literature was subsequently integrated into the analysis to provide theoretical and contextual frameworks. This integration allowed deeper insights into policy implementation challenges, systemic transport management issues, infrastructure inadequacies and theoretical grounding of identified practical issues. Scientific literature was analysed to complement and critically validate findings from the grey literature analysis. Integration of scientific literature provides a robust understanding of scholar transport challenges from both practical and theoretical perspectives.

Results and discussion

This study revealed persistent gaps between policy intent and practical implementation in scholar transport in South Africa, particularly concerning safety, infrastructure, funding and governance. Analysis of both grey and scientific literature consistently identified several recurring themes, including frequent road accidents involving learners, inadequate transport safety oversight, widespread corruption, insufficient government oversight and poor compliance with established transport policies. These insights emerged primarily from a systematic content analysis of grey literature (newspaper articles from 2010 to 2024), subsequently complemented and reinforced by available scientific literature, providing a robust, multidimensional understanding of the challenges. The findings are divided into five categories, which are: (1)

provision of scholar transport services, (2) provision of scholar transport infrastructure, (3) accidents, (4) transport associations and (5) crime.

Provision of scholar transport services

For some learners, the journey of learning begins with the often challenging journey to school. Physical and geographical barriers, such as long distances, harsh weather conditions and inadequate transportation services, can impede access to educational opportunities in South Africa. In these circumstances, scholar transport services have emerged as critical interventions, serving as bridges across these barriers and promoting educational equity. According to Manyaka and Mathebula (2020), developing countries are increasingly providing scholar transport to improve school access and shorten travel distance. This section discusses the complexities surrounding the provision of transport services, bringing out the challenges within South Africa.

The current National Learner Transport Policy is flawed, as the policy only provides transport to learners who live more than 5 km from school. The National Learner Transport Policy is not in line with international standards. Firstly, there does not appear to be any scientific or medical study supporting the choice of only providing transport to those living more than 5 km from school. Cavagna, Franzetti and Fuchimoto (1983) found that it takes an average child aged 12 years one hour to walk 5 km. Thus, the National Learner Transport Policy assumes that a 12-year-old child can be reasonably expected to spend two hours walking to school and back each day. This is contrary to several studies and recommendations. For example, South Africa's athletic rules and regulations state a child must be at least nine years old to complete a distance of 5 km and 15 years to complete 10 km (Central Gauteng Athletics 2024). The Physical Activity Guidelines for School-Aged Children and Adolescents issued by the USA, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend 60 min of vigorous activity for children three days a week (CDC 2022). The United Kingdom's National Health Service (NHS) recommends even less time, only one 60-min session per week (NHS 2024).

While both the CDC and NHS may both be erring on the side of caution, they would also be basing their recommendations on children who are not struggling with malnutrition, stunting or undernutrition (lack of iron, for example) as (unfortunately) many rural children in South Africa do (Clarke et al. 2021; Modjadji & Madiba 2019). Finally, a review study by Tudor-Locke et al. (2011) indicates that highly active children (6–19 years) can be expected to walk for one hour a day. Thus, the National Learner Transport Policy is out of alignment with international and medical norms. In addition, the National Learner Transport Policy is not aligned to the South African Schools Act (SASA) (No 84 of 1996), as transport will only be provided to the nearest school, despite SASA giving parents the right to school choice.

Secondly, even among eligible learners, not all receive public scholar transport services. A significant 21.5% are reported to be left stranded (Zeeman 2023), highlighting a widespread problem throughout the country (Manyaka & Mathebula 2020). In 2023, a significant number of learners in the Eastern Cape failed to attend school for the first term because of the lack of transport. The Eastern Cape Department of Education claimed inadequate funding (Sizani 2023). Similarly, in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, a significant number of learners were also left stranded (Singh 2021). In most cases, learners in rural or remote areas, such as farms, are the most affected. Because of high levels of poverty, learners must then walk long distances to access school (Mnguni & Morton McKay 2022). Some children also walk a long distance to and from their drop-off and/or pick-up points (Mgushelo 2018).

Thirdly, some transport operators are unreliable. Mgushelo (2018) found transport services for learners in the rural Eastern Cape had no fixed times to pick up learners. As such, some learners often arrive late at school. Similarly, Portwig (2018) found that unreliable transport services cause anxiety among learners. Worse is that abandoned learners can be exposed to danger such as muggings, rape, kidnapping and other dangers (Nala 2020).

Fourthly, scholar transport operators are not always paid on time (Dangazele 2024). This makes it difficult for operators to provide scholar transport and results in operators struggling financially. Potentially, both the quality and reliability of scholar transport services become compromised. In the Eastern Cape province, the DoT has rolled out a new system known as the Learner Transport Management System. The new system manages and monitors the end-to-end process of the Scholar Transport Programme, which may improve the payment system for scholar transport operators (Dangazele 2024).

Provision of scholar transport infrastructure

Beyond the scholar transport services, the element of infrastructure within schools is often overlooked; yet infrastructure enhances the safety and security of learners, especially during pick-up and drop-off times. Thus, scholar transport safety is not just about vehicles but also the underlying infrastructure. According to the School Infrastructure Safety and Security Guidelines, drop-off and pick-up zones for learners are required and should:

Be provided in all the schools, where possible; Must be fully visible from the school; Must be located in the vicinity of the main entrance if these are provided outside the school; busses and taxis must be separated from the drop of area for private vehicles. (Department of Basic Education 2017:32)

Included in the School Infrastructure Safety and Security Guidelines is the provision for pedestrian crossings, speed humps, traffic calming measures and the provision of parking for emergency vehicles. But, as most schools that serve disadvantaged learners suffer from financial, space or capacity constraints, such guidelines exist on paper only.

Furthermore, it is not clear if schools have such a mandate, as the public roads fall under the jurisdiction of local government. So even if schools had the capacity, they do not have the right to make changes to public roads. As a result, there is an increased risk of accidents, disrupted traffic flow and road rage. The Road Traffic Management Corporation (RTMC) recommends a speed limit of 30 km/h around schools (Roux 2020).

Another issue is the poor condition of the roads (Mashwama, Thwala & Aigbavboa 2019). South Africa's rural areas are characterised by poor transport infrastructure and longer travel distances over poorly maintained roads (Manyaka & Mathebula 2020; Mgushelo 2018). Yet, urban roads in South Africa are often only marginally better, with potholes, poor signage, poor lighting, dysfunctional traffic lights and stop signs, poor driving, heavy traffic and overloaded vehicles becoming ubiquitous (Henderson 2014). Key infrastructure elements for safety, such as designated drop-off zones, pedestrian walkways and crosswalks, lighting, security personnel and signage and markings, are often absent.

Scholar transport accidents

South Africa has an alarmingly high vehicular accident rate (Roux 2020). The number of accidents involving learners is a major concern (Francke 2023). The RTMC identifies speeding as a key contributing factor (Roux 2020). In addition, unsuitable vehicles operating with fraudulent roadworthy certificates further exacerbate this problem (Western Cape Mobility Department 2023). According to Regulation 250 of the *National Road Traffic Act (Act No. 93 of 1996)*, 'no schoolchildren may be carried in the goods compartment of a vehicle for reward'. While Regulation 247 states that:

[T]he part of the vehicle carrying passengers must be enclosed with material strong enough to prevent a person from falling off the vehicle, to a height of at least 350 millimetres above the surface on which the passengers sit.

Regulations 250 and 247 of the National Road Traffic Act are not aligned; therefore, learners will continue to be transported by light delivery vehicles (bakkies), especially in rural and remote areas (Portwig 2018).

Recently, six learners in the Western Cape, who were being transported in a bakkie, died in a fatal crash (Mkize 2023). In 2022, a horrific accident in Pongola, KZN, killed 21 learners when a bakkie carrying learners had a head-on collision with a truck (Ngema 2022). In 2017, five learners were killed in a collision of a bakkie and a taxi (Arrive Alive 2017). In the same year, another 10 learners lost their lives in a similar manner (Gous 2017). In 2015, seven learners lost their lives in a bakkie accident in KZN (IOL News 2018).

Another problem is overloading, which is widespread (Moichela 2022). Overloading increases the risk of accidents. Moreover, the impact is much more severe in the event of a collision. Yet, South African law does address overloading in

the case of children; in fact, Regulation 231 of the National Road Traffic Act does not even view children under three years of age as passengers. Two children between three and six years are counted as one, and three children between the ages of six and 13 are counted as two people. Thus, an eight-seat vehicle can legally accommodate more than 16 children (seated) depending on their age (MasterDrive SA 2017). For example, in the Eastern Cape province, 50 learners were found on board in a 15-seater vehicle (Hartleb 2015). In the Limpopo province, a minibus certified for 14 passengers was found with 58 learners on board (Dlulane 2020). Overloading incidents raise concerns about the safety of learners on the road and can lead to loss of trust and confidence in the transport system. Such an ongoing pattern of non-compliance with traffic regulations raises questions about the enforcement of traffic rules and regulations.

Scholar transport vehicles in South Africa appear to be exempt from child restraint laws (Hunter et al. 2020), leading to dangerous practices. Learners routinely sit in the front seat, and seatbelts are often either absent or unused in these vehicles (Puvanachandra et al. 2020). Recently, in the Gauteng province, two grade 6 learners fell out of moving buses and lost their lives (Maromo 2024; Masilela 2022). These fatalities raise concerns about safety measures. Table 1 lists scholar-related accidents reported since 2015. It is possible that many are unreported. Table 1 highlights the alarming rate and severity of scholar transport accidents across South Africa. The main causes of accidents are reckless driving, overloading, mechanical failures, use of bakkies and lack of control (Walters 2013). Many learners lost their lives, while others suffered serious injuries because of these accidents.

Transport associations

Although transport associations play a crucial role in maintaining operational efficiency in the informal and mostly unregulated minibus taxi industry, their influence on scholar transport is complex (Fourie & Pretorius 2005; Govender & Allopi 2006; Tshwete 2023). For example, there is no statutory obligation for scholar transport operators to register with any association. Scholar transport operators often function independently of the minibus taxi industry. Some may be part-time operators supplementing their income with scholar transport or simply including learners as part of their usual routes. Thus, there is little oversight from minibus taxi associations. Many families perceive private scholar transport fees as exploitative and their contracts unfair, including the practice of full-year billing despite school holidays (Motloding 2022). While the number of scholar transport associations and operators steadily increases, a major concern is their widespread lack of knowledge and training in safe and effective scholar transport practices (Bolton 2023).

Furthermore, minibus taxi associations are known to hold protests by either refusing to transport passengers or blocking the roads (Walters 2010). In such cases, learners are prevented from attending school. Transport associations

threaten the very system that ensures safe commutes for learners. This is also true for bus transport, especially when bus drivers go on strike (Machard 2022). Some associations operate more like cartels, restricting who can enter the industry (Tsinde 2023). In Cata, KZN, scholar transport operators must pay fees to an existing scholar transport association and the Cape Amalgamated Taxi Association (Cawe 2021). This is not just a financial burden to operators but creates a situation whereby learners are pawns in a power struggle between associations (Evans 2021). In another incident in Umlazi, KZN, learners were left stranded at school when scholar transport operators were threatened by the Operation Hlokomela Taxi Association. Some of the demands made by taxi associations are outrageous; hence the taxi association allegedly demanded scholar transport operators pay a fee for transporting high school learners (Zondi 2023).

Similarly, in Cape Town, there is a power struggle between minibus taxi operators, scholar transport operators and the Western Cape Department of Education. This has left thousands of learners stranded as minibus taxi operators prevent scholar transport operators from operating (Ludidi 2023). Seemingly, the minibus taxi operators were aggrieved when they did not get scholar transport service contracts from the Western Cape Department of Education (Tshwete 2023). Transportation of learners resumed only after the Western Cape High Court interdicted the minibus taxi association (Congress of Democratic Taxi Association [CODETA]) from interfering with scholar transport (Washinyira 2023).

The clashes between minibus taxi drivers and scholar transport drivers result from a complex combination of economic, regulatory, political and social factors (Fobosi 2019). In some cases, the battle is over government scholar transport contracts. In others, it is from taxi drivers and owners who are marginally profitable who want to transport learners as a 'side gig' (Fobosi 2021). While a formalised framework for scholar transport may be a solution, not all think it will reduce exploitation, violence or unsafe driving (Davids 2023).

Crime

South Africa's scholar transport system is a microcosm, revealing the underlying values and behaviours of the wider society. In the scholar transport industry, crime, corruption, misconduct and blatant disregard for rules and regulations are becoming endemic. It is not surprising that the scholar transport industry is seemingly embedded in a web of criminal activity, misconduct by service providers and drivers and systematic corruption facilitated by school and government officials (Ellman 2015; Maile & Vyas-Doorgapersad 2023; Naidoo, Reddy & Zondi 2023; Sefara & Odeku 2023).

In the Western Cape province of South Africa, some school governing body (SGB) members from different schools in the

TABLE 1: Scholar transport accidents in South Africa, between 2010 and 2024, by province.

Date	Journalist and publisher	Impact		Vehicle type	Cause
		Killed	Injured		
Western Cape province					
30 May 2023	Mkize (Sunday World)	6	-	Bakkie	Reckless driving
28 April 2023	Solomons (News24)	2	-	Minibus taxi	Overload and reckless driving
20 Aug. 2021	Damons (GroundUp)	-	>20	Minibus taxi	Overloaded vehicle crashed into a barrier
25 Aug. 2010	CTVNews	9	5	Minibus taxi	Hit by an oncoming train
Gauteng province					
01 Feb. 2024	Maromo (IOL)	1	-	bus	Child fell out of a moving bus
06 Nov. 2023	Motsoere (EWN)	-	17	Minibus taxi	Collision of two taxis
13 Feb. 2023	Gounden (EWN)	1	13	Toyota Condor	Lost control, overturned, was overloaded
21 Oct. 2022	Luvhengo (Timeslive)	2	-	Bus	Overturned
29 Sept. 2022	Masilela (IOL)	1	-	Bus	Child fell under a moving bus
07 Sept. 2022	Moichela (IOL)	1	7	Minibus taxi	Children hit by scholar transport bus at the hostel pick-up point
30 Aug. 2022	Mahamba (IOL)	-	17	Minibus taxi	Tyre burst and lost control
28 July 2022	Tshikalange (Timeslive)	1	-	Bus	Child run over while trying to board scholar bus
17 Feb. 2020	Sobuwa (Sowetanlive)	2	-	Minibus taxi	Taxi collided with motorbike
17 Feb. 2020	Marupeng (Sowetanlive)	-	12	Minibus taxi	Taxi hit a wall, was speeding and driving recklessly
29 Jan. 2020	Grobler (EWN)	-	19	Minibus taxi	Overturned
06 Mar. 2020	Pijoos (Sowetan Live)	-	20	Minibus taxi	Vehicle crash
Eastern Cape province					
23 Oct. 2017	Mjangaza (Sowetanlive)	4	-	Bus	Lost control and overturned
Mpumalanga province					
31 Aug. 2018	IOL	5	-	Minibus taxi	Head-on collision with a bus
21 April 2017	Kamwendo-Mtambo and Macharia (Business Insider)	19	-	Minibus taxi	Taxi collided with a truck and exploded
North West province					
03 June 2022	Madumo (The South African)	-	3	Bus	2 buses rear-ended
22 Aug. 2019	Sobuwa (Sowetanlive)	-	13	Not stated	Driver lost control
14 Aug. 2019	Njilo (Sowetanlive)	-	22	Minibus taxi	Head-on collision
14 May 2023	Tshehle (Sowetanlive)	2	-	Bus	The bus rolled off the road after engine left running
KwaZulu-Natal province					
08 Aug. 2023	Duma (News24)	6	-	Bus	Driver lost control
18 Sept. 2022	Ngema (IOL)	21	-	Bakkie	Head-on collision with truck
06 Aug. 2019	Baxter (SA People News)	-	72	Bus	Overturned and crashed
07 Sept. 2017	Gous (Timeslive)	10	113	Minibus taxi and bakkies	Collision
05 Sept. 2017	Wicks (Timeslive)	1	47	Bus	Bus crashed
25 Aug. 2017	Macupe (Mail & Guardian)	8	14	Different modes	-
08 May 2017	Arrive Alive	5	-	Bakkie and bus	Collided with each other
06 June 2016	Corke (EWN)	-	20	Minibus taxi	Driver lost control
29 Jan. 2015	Regchand (IOL)	7	-	Bakkie	Bakkie crashed
Limpopo province					
03 Mar. 2023	Sekwela (Daily Sun)	6	-	Minibus taxi	Head-on collision with a truck and taxi

province defrauded millions of Rands dedicated for scholar transport services (Simpson 2023). While in the Eastern Cape province, senior transport officials allegedly paid non-existent scholar transport providers close to R14.9 m since 2020 (Gosa 2023). In 2020, a court ruling stopped the Department of Education in the Limpopo province from awarding a R1.2 billion scholar transport tender, as there were serious irregularities in the tender awarding process. Operators had submitted bids containing false information, such as claiming to own non-existent vehicles and using the registration numbers of sedans and light delivery vehicles while falsely presenting them as buses (Ramothwala 2020). While it is good the tender did not go ahead, it also

means learners do not have access to transportation. In the North West province, the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) found a bus operator inflating the distances travelled (a common problem with all bus companies contracted to the State) between the years 2010 and 2017 (Government Communications 2022; McKay et al. 2017). Such misappropriation of funds not only affects learners who rely on public scholar transport but also erodes public trust and hampers efforts to improve equity in access to education.

Although scholar transport drivers hold a position of trust and responsibility, there are many concerning incidents of assaults on learners using scholar transport. In Chatsworth,

KZN, for example, a scholar transport driver was accused of raping an 11-year-old learner (Mathonsi 2021). Another driver was found guilty of showing learners pornographic material (Pillay 2022). In another case, a driver was charged with drugging and raping pre-school children in Uphongolo, KZN (The Witness 2023). In Cape Town, a driver was found guilty of raping a learner in 2020 (Tshwete 2023). In another incident, in Hoopstaf, Free State province, a driver was arrested for assaulting a learner aged 17 years (Pijoos 2020). Reports of assaults by drivers are also common in Umlazi, KZN (Nala 2020).

In Limpopo, a scholar transport driver was shot by a rival while transporting learners. Several learners sustained injuries as they jumped from the moving vehicle to avoid being shot (McCain 2023). However, such killings are not uncommon (Muthige & Beneke 2022). Learners who witness such violence can be traumatised, and the incident can create a sense of fear and insecurity. There are also some scholar transport drivers who transport learners while under the influence of alcohol (Francke 2024). Such behaviour raises concerns about inadequate vetting of drivers before they are allowed to transport minors.

The study also found that some operators go out of their way to obtain fraudulent roadworthy certificates. In the Western Cape province, some operators were arrested for fraudulent roadworthy certificates (Western Cape Mobility Department 2023). Unroadworthy vehicles not only endanger the lives of learners but of all road users.

The identified policy implementation gaps and managerial challenges are illustrated by numerous documented incidents. Between 2017 and 2023, at least 113 learners were injured, with 10 fatalities reported in KwaZulu-Natal alone because of scholar transport-related accidents (Duma 2023; Gous 2017). Furthermore, corruption persists, exemplified by the misappropriation of approximately R15 million involving 'ghost' scholar transport vehicles in the Eastern Cape (Gosa 2023). Such examples underline the urgency for comprehensive managerial interventions, improved governance mechanisms and strict adherence to policy regulations, reinforcing the need for immediate and coordinated action.

Conclusion

The study reveals a complex interplay between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities, marked by inadequacies in legislation, compliance and enforcement. Despite comprehensive policies and legislation aimed at ensuring the safety and security of scholar transport, the prevalence of accidents, fraudulent roadworthy certificates and crime highlight a significant lack of enforcement.

This study highlights the urgency of enhancing learner safety and security, advocating for the integration of child safety restraints in vehicles, stringent driving tests for transporters

of minors and obligatory criminal background checks – a practice already mandated for educators. The imperative for legal action against non-compliant vehicle owners and operators is clear. Furthermore, the need for the National Treasury to augment funding for learner transport, facilitating the creation of designated, secure drop-off and pick-up zones, is pivotal. Additionally, the establishment of more boarding schools could mitigate the extensive daily commutes faced by rural learners, thereby reducing their exposure to the hazards of scholar transport. The study emphasises the importance of socio-economic rights and safety for learners.

This research recommends practical interventions aimed at improving governance quality, institutional integrity and accountability. Comprehensive training and certification programmes for scholar transport providers should be instituted, alongside adopting technology-based solutions such as real-time tracking systems, to improve transparency and operational oversight. The responsibility for implementing training and certification programmes, as well as adopting technology-based solutions, should not primarily fall upon the government only but different stakeholders. A coordinated effort across different stakeholders ensures successful implementation, effective monitoring and sustainable management of training and technology-based oversight solutions.

This article contributes to the scholarly understanding of transport dynamics in educational access and the geographies of South African children, offering insights into the logistical, safety and security challenges inherent in scholar transport. It notes the gap between policy frameworks and their implementation, highlighting a need for a holistic approach to address these challenges. This study calls for a concerted effort to prioritise learner safety and accessibility. There is a need to ensure the journey to school is safe, reliable and conducive to the learning experience. This research thus stands as a critical reflection on the state of scholar transport in South Africa, advocating for systemic improvements that align policy aspirations with the lived realities of learners navigating their daily commutes to school.

The findings of this study reinforce and expand on the concept of the implementation gap and also existing theories of policy implementation proposed by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) and Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980). The existing theories emphasise administrative complexity, resource availability and clarity of policy objectives. This research confirms significant implementation gaps because of fragmented responsibilities and insufficient integrated coordination. However, the study challenges existing theoretical frameworks by highlighting systemic corruption, financial mismanagement and accountability failures as factors undermining policy outcomes. This study contributes to theory by asserting the critical role of governance quality and institutional integrity, expanding beyond the conventional theoretical emphasis on administrative complexity alone.

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Authors' contributions

B.D. contributed to the conceptualisation and writing up of the original draft. T.J.M.M. reviewed and edited the manuscript. A.G. reviewed and edited the manuscript.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the College of Business and Economics research ethics committee of the Department of Transport and Supply Chain Management at the University of Johannesburg with consent received on 27 January 2025 with ethical approval number 2025-TSCM001.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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