



Family Digest 28

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Child Drownings

Recently the news has been dominated by the death due to drowning¹ of two children, eight year old Mosa Mbele, from the QwaQwa area of the Free State, who drowned while fetching water from a nearby stream; and 13 year old Enock Mpianzi, a new pupil at Parktown Boys High School in Johannesburg, who drowned in the Crocodile River at the Nyati Bush and River Breakaway near Brits in the North West Province, while participating in a water activity as part of a school orientation programme. While the circumstances leading up to their deaths were different, both children's deaths were avoidable and both speak to the issue of negligence by people in positions of responsibility. Drowning mortality rates are high in children under the age of fifteen, and drowning is increasing as a proportion of all non-natural deaths.² It is serious public health issue: according to Statistics South Africa, fatal drowning is the fifth leading cause of unintentional death in the country.³

Enock Mpianzi

Enock went missing on Wednesday 15 January during the school's annual Grade 8 camp. As Grade 8 learners they were new to the school and to each other. The activity required the learners to build a makeshift stretcher/raft using materials such as wooden poles and shoelaces. These 'rafts' would then be used to transport the learners to a meeting place further down the flowing river, where they would meet up with camp facilitators and prefects who were the only persons in positions of authority present. The camp facilitators were the only ones with experience of the river. It seems that at no point was there a roll call, the learners did not wear any identifying information, and they were new to the school and to one another. The register of boys attending the camp was left on the bus. Apparently, no life jackets were issued and learners were not told to bring one with them. The school authorities and the camp facilitators, it is alleged, were slow to react and seemingly dismissive of alerts from learners that one of their number was missing. Furthermore, a number of children testified that they required assistance in getting out of the river.

The supervision of the children engaging in a potentially hazardous activity seems to have been woefully inadequate when taking into account the presence of the headmaster, other teachers and camp facilitators at the venue. Moreover, the culture of silence adopted by the school after the event was disturbing. The Department of Education has strict regulations regarding school outings and activities, particularly those involving water, and it seems that the school did not comply with these. Disturbingly, Enoch was not the first child to drown at this venue,⁴ but this does not appear to have resulted in greater vigilance on behalf of the school or the camp.

Sadly, Enock was not the only child to drown recently while in the care of an educational facility: twelve year old Keamogetswe Seboko drowned at Laerskool Bekker in Magaliesburg a few days

after Enock's death.⁵ The following links give more background to these sad events, and show that they are not isolated. Far more needs to be done to ensure the safety of children around water.

<https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/breaking-body-of-missing-parktown>

<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-01-20-classes-suspended-at-parktown-boys-high-school/>

<https://ewn.co.za/2020/01/21/nw-saps-obtained-statements-from-pupils-to-help-probe-mpianzi-s-death>

<https://ewn.co.za/2020/01/22/nyati-lodge-didn-t-notice-mpianzi-was-missing>

<https://tinyurl.com/rtkg2b5>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-01-21-what-the-law-says-on-the-parktown-drowning-tragedy/>

<https://ewn.co.za/2020/01/23/timeline-child-drownings-at-nyati-date-back-to-1999>

<https://tinyurl.com/sgp9dh2>

Mosa Mbele

Little eight year old Mosa Mbele drowned near Phuthaditjhaba in the QwaQwa area of the Eastern Free State, while fetching water from a river; she was swept away by the strong current. Her mother, Phindile Mbele, said that this tragedy would not have occurred if the family had had running water.⁶ QwaQwa and surrounding areas have been battling with chronic water shortages for years, and this tragedy proved to be the catalyst for service delivery protests which resulted in violence. The community blamed the municipality and residents shut down all the surrounding areas in protest over the water crisis. All roads entering Phuthaditjhaba were barricaded, shops were looted and water tanks were damaged. Community leaders were arrested, and police used rubber bullets to disperse protesting residents.

Mosa's death highlights the lack of access to water in several parts of QwaQwa, with residents saying that taps have been dry since October 2019. People in the area have been battling with water accessibility issues for years,⁷ and the failure to supply water is impacting negatively on the estimated population of 380 000 in the greater QwaQwa area. This crisis continues in spite of the national government's recent allocation of R30 million for boreholes – due to mismanagement, these boreholes have yet to be installed and the area has been reliant on a few water tankers.

The service delivery protests resulted in the isolation of the local hospital – which was already facing challenges – and health services have almost collapsed in the area. Medical staff could not enter or leave the hospital, and there were concerns regarding the well-being of patients. In addition, many children were unable to attend school.

National government responded to the week-long protests with Minister of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation, Lindiwe Sisulu, announcing that 5 000 water tanks would be distributed to households within seven days, and that the government would be allocating R220m to address the water shortages in the QwaQwa area. At the time of writing it was not clear how much progress had been made in this regard.

The sad passing of both these children could have been avoided if people in positions of authority on both a micro and macro level – from school and camp staff to councillors and the national government – were simply doing their jobs properly.

<https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/protests/2234051/qwaqwa-shutdown-leaders-released-as-protest-for-water-continues>

<https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/medical-staff-trapped-in-volatile-qwaqwa-as-residents-demand-water-20200121>

<https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Local/Express-News/plans-to-solve-water-crisis-in-place-20191105>

<https://mybroadband.co.za/forum/threads/violence-erupts-in-qwaqwa-after-child-8-drowns-while-fetching-water-in-river.1065932/>

<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/qwaqwa-water-crisis-lindiwe-sisulu-sets-aside-millions/>

<https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-01-27-qwaqwa-shutdown-will-take-us-backward-says-government>

<https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Local/Express-News/plans-to-solve-water-crisis-in-place-20191105>

<https://ewn.co.za/2020/02/06/water-dept-has-plan-to-fix-water-crisis-in-qwaqwa-in-wake-of-protests>

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¹ Drowning is defined as the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid and can have one of three outcomes - no morbidity, morbidity or mortality. The person encountering difficulty may be rescued without experiencing harm, while another may experience some form of morbidity while another may succumb to drowning (See 2 below)

² http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0256-95742018000100017a

³ Stats SA 2017

⁴ <https://ewn.co.za/2020/01/21/enock-mpianzi-not-first-child-to-drown-at-nyati-lodge>

⁵ <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/school-safety-unit-sent-to-support-gaut-eng-doe--an>

⁶ <https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/protests/2231795/mosa-would-be-alive-if-we-had-water-says-mother-during-qwaqwa-prote>

⁷ <https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/local-news/2233312/lindiwe-sisulu-pledges-r220m-to-address-qwaqwa-water-woes/>