

THE SCOPE OF VIOLENCE IN A NUMBER OF GAUTENG SCHOOLS¹

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ABSTRACT

The mass communication media in South Africa carry reports on violence in all its forms on an almost daily basis, while there are numerous examples of the wave of violence that is engulfing South Africa (SA) and impacting on our school culture. Research has shown that harassment (including peer and sexual harassment) is rife in our schools. The isolated incidents of extreme school violence and the more “bizarre” exceptions of assault and sexual violence in schools receive wide media coverage, which makes it difficult to gauge the true scope of school violence. The SA National Schools Violence Study (NSVS) surveyed 245 schools country-wide and the statistics from the NSVS as well as the examples of media reportage lay bare the general feeling of malaise which is caused by the hopelessness and helplessness resulting from violence in schools. Although the issue of violence is a government priority, it is evident that the Department of Education has little or no comprehensive data on the levels of violence within schools, while there seems to be no or very little research specifically focusing on the perceptions of student teachers on school violence. The purpose of this research was therefore to determine the perceptions among teachers in the Pretoria region as well as student teachers at the University of Pretoria (UP) In this regard with a view to providing education departments with guidelines for dealing with the related challenges.

The literature study on various forms of violence in schools, the student teachers’ written group reflections on the open-ended interview questions and the interviewees’ oral replies and discussions based on the same open-ended interview questions constitute the qualitative data. The research suggests that the extent of violence in some inner city schools is greater than in suburban schools, where it occurs mainly outside the school grounds. Violence in a number of inner city schools is more prevalent among girls than among boys and often involves the use of weapons, such as scissors. Learners sometimes regard violence as the only way to resolve issues and often model it on what they learn at home in this regard. Violence in schools is also, however, sometimes perpetrated by teachers who are unable to discipline learners effectively. Furthermore, school violence exacerbates feelings of insecurity and fear among learners and teachers, who sometimes stay away from or even leave their schools because of their exposure to it.

¹ Some of the views expressed in this article were first voiced by the authors at the Gauteng Department of Education Inaugural Research Conference on 9 March 2009 (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2009a).

The vast majority of learners and teachers appear to be in need of encouragement, assistance and support, both emotionally and spiritually, and it is therefore puzzling that very little use is made of psychologists; in fact, recent research suggests that the psychological support system in the education department has all but disappeared. The immediate introduction of a year of compulsory community service for all graduating teachers and educational psychologists is thus strongly recommended to alleviate learners' and teachers' counselling and other needs and needs to be considered also by the Minister of Education. However, it is equally important to ensure that these teachers and psychologists teach and practice in rural and township schools in particular – and to provide appropriate incentives (safety, financial and otherwise), to make it attractive and inviting for them to venture into deep rural regions and township schools. Not only will such a step alleviate the current shortages in the field: it has the potential to impact significantly on relationships across the diversity divide and promote better understanding of the idiosyncratic needs of all communities.

INTRODUCTION

The mass communication media in South Africa carry reports on violence in all its forms on an almost daily basis. The random killing of 16 year-old Jacques Pretorius by Morné Harmse with an ornamental samurai sword at the Technical High School Nic Diederichs on the West Rand in Gauteng a year ago and his subsequent attack on another learner and two gardeners (Berger, 2008), serves as but a single manifestation of the wave of violence (which could also be called a “tsunami”), that is engulfing South Africa (SA) and impacting on our school culture. Two of Harmse’s friends who had planned to participate in the attempt “to get people to take notice of them” (News 24: D-day for sword killer, 2009); Independent Online: Sword killer’s sentencing postponed, 2009), decided, despite their earlier agreement, to bring only a fake bomb and no guns on the day Harmse murdered his fellow learner. The learner injured by Harmse stated: “When he spoke it did not sound like him at all ... I was shocked to see it was him. He was just not the kind of person who would do something like that ... I will never forgive him” (Berger, 2008).

There are many other examples of the extreme consequences of school violence as attested to by school ground incidents perpetrated by learners, such as the stabbing to death with a pair of scissors of a grade 9 learner; the axe-killing of an eight year-old by two schoolmates (Mqota, 2007); the stabbing to death of Mfundo Ntshangase, a grade 11 learner, at a house party (Naidu, 2007a), as well as the repeated occurrence of “shootings, rapes, assaults and drug deals on the grounds” of schools on the Cape Flats, which are described as “war zones” (Hartley, 2007).

Research has shown that harassment (including peer and sexual harassment), is rife in our schools (Neser, 2006; Prinsloo, 2006; Prinsloo & Neser, 2007a). As indicated by Prinsloo and Neser (2007a: 322) in their discussion of the incidence of school violence from 2001 to 2006, the more “bizarre” exceptions of assault and sexual violence in schools receive wide media coverage, but it should be noted that school violence is a “complex phenomenon”. The publicity afforded such isolated incidents of extreme school violence make it difficult to gauge the scope of school violence (Mqota, 2007). In his overview of the South African Human Rights Commission report on the public hearing regarding the right to basic education, the chairperson,

Jody Kollapen, revealed that romanticising violence in “some media as well as in some music genres has led to its easy internalization by young people eager to emulate their heroes” (2006). The so-called Samurai-killer, Morné Harmse, wore a mask similar to those worn by the members of the American metal band Slipknot, and was believed to be influenced by their music (Berger, 2008). The ripple effect of the violence tsunami, in particular the increasing use of guns, knives and sexual violence, has for example, resulted in manifestations of violence in everyday school-life, which are not necessarily reported, e.g. “playground games such as ‘Stab me, Stab me’ or ‘Rape me, Rape me’” (Kollapen 2006).

The South African National Schools Violence Study (NSVS) surveyed 245 schools country-wide, including 12 794 primary and high school learners, 264 principals and 521 educators. The report, for example, indicates the extent and type of violence experienced by secondary school learners while at school, namely:

- 14.5% were threatened;
- 4.3% were assaulted;
- 5.9% were robbed; and
- 3.1% experienced some form of sexual violence (Burton, 2008a).

Schools in SA have not escaped the effects and impact of increasing levels of violence in society and 15.3% of a total of 12 794 primary and secondary school learners surveyed in SA have experienced some form of violence at school (Burton, 2008a) (cf Burton, 2008b; De Wet, 2003, 2005, 2007a, b; Prinsloo & Nesor, 2007a, b). The rate of violence in secondary schools in SA is 43 learners per 1 000, as opposed to five per 1 000 in the United States (US) (Burton 2008a). It should be stressed that violence is not limited by either school location (e.g. urban, semi-urban, township or rural) or school type (e.g. traditionally disadvantaged or traditionally privileged) (Masitsa, 2008). Quite the opposite: Schools of all types and in virtually all parts of the country are affected by violence in various ways. Furthermore, De Wet (2007a) has found that factors such as school size and location have a significant impact on violence and violence-related behaviour: Secondary schools with more than 500 learners and rural schools appear particularly prone to both learner and educator violence and violence-related behaviour.

The statistics from the NSVS and the examples of media reportage discussed lay bare the “malaise fed by the hopelessness and helplessness”, generated by violence in schools – the very schools which, according to the Constitution of South Africa are meant to protect learners (children) from “maltreatment, neglect abuse or degradation” and to ensure their right “to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources” (Nesor, 2005). Clearly, the perceptions of those who experience and witness violence in schools need to be examined closely to determine ways to ensure that schools become safe havens for all learners according, not only to the country’s Constitution, but also according to the universal principle that we “all have the right to feel safe all of the time” (Cann as cited in Nesor, 2005).

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Vithal and Jansen (2002) and Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2009b) state that a rationale serves as a statement of first, how a researcher developed an interest in a

particular topic; and secondly, exactly why a researcher believes that his or her research is worth conducting.

The authors of this article developed an interest in the topic when confronted with violence and its extremely negative effects during various stages of their careers as educators at both secondary and tertiary level. This was amplified by the fact that the research also revealed that the effects of violence (including bullying) extend deep into adulthood, probably lasting *ad infinitum* (Maree, 2005). As a result the possible negative effects of violence on learners – more so given the frame of reference of a seemingly ever-increasing spiral of violence in South Africa – gave rise to serious concerns in this regard.

As far as the second criterion above is concerned, i.e. why the research is worth doing, the researchers concur with the view that school is a “socialiser” and that violence in schools is counter-productive to the idea of socialising learners (Prinsloo & Naser, 2007a).

Although the issue of violence is a government priority, it has become evident that “the Department of Education (DoE) itself, has little or no comprehensive data on the levels of violence within schools” (Burton, 2008a). According to UNESCO this is a global lack (Burton, 2008a), especially in developing countries (Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007). And, although a number of researchers have recently focused on school violence in relation to learners and/or teachers in South Africa (Burton, 2008a; De Wet, 2007a, b; De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Prinsloo & Naser, 2007a; Liang et al., 2007), the authors of this article have been unable to locate any research specifically focusing on the perceptions of student teachers on school violence.

OVERVIEW

A definition of school violence

Although bullying and violence are regarded as distinct manifestations of negative actions, Olweus (as cited in Liang et al., 2007,) specifies that they are “subcategories of aggressive behaviour, between which there is an overlap denoting bullying by physical means” and that “a single instance” of “serious harassment can be regarded as bullying under certain circumstances” (as cited in Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, De Bettencourt & Lemme, 2006).

Olweus’ definition of bullying (as cited in Liang et al., 2007; Naylor et al., 2006), to a large extent coincides with Burton’s (2008b) view on school violence, which acknowledges that despite conflicting opinions on exactly what constitutes school violence, popular discourse “includes all nature of intentional harm or discomfort inflicted on learners, including incidents such as schoolyard fights, bullying and drug abuse”, as well as “less overt forms of violence against girls and women” (also see Kollapan, 2006; Lam & Liu, 2007; Smit, 2003).

For the purposes of this research the term “violence” will be used to refer to all forms of physical and verbal abuse, including bullying, unless the word “bullying” is contained in quotations from or direct references to sources consulted.

Brief international perspective

The number of large-scale violence intervention programmes in developed countries world-wide, subsequent to the seminal Olweus study conducted in Bergen, Norway, from 1983 to 1985, is an indication of the extent of school violence globally. For example, in 2003 the United States Department of Health and Human Services developed a “Stop bullying now” website to disseminate information and offer guidelines for prevention (Srabstein, Berkman & Pyntikova, 2008). Other countries in which large-scale initiatives have been launched to restrict school violence include Australia and Canada (Srabstein et al., 2008); The Netherlands (Mooij, 2005); Italy (Gini, 2004); as well as Spain, the United Kingdom, Norway and Finland (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen & Voeten, 2005). In Switzerland, called “Heidi land” by Klingeman (as cited in Kuntsche & Klingeman, 2004), more than one in ten boys are victims of physical violence and are physically violent themselves, while a third of adolescent girls are at the same time victims and perpetrators of non-physical violence (Kuntsche & Klingeman, 2004). In Japan, school violence was contained during the 1970s, but the aggressive behaviour, or “ijime”, constituted by physical action, which causes “more psychological than physical suffering”, became the focus of research on violence in Japanese schools during the 1980s (Kanetsuna, Smith & Morita, 2006). Approximately 42% of primary and 28% of secondary school learners surveyed in Italy had been victims of bullying in the three months preceding the survey. Other studies have found that there is a higher incidence of bullying in Italy than in other countries, but no single explanation exists for this “peculiarity” (Gini, 2004). The extent of violence in both primary and secondary schools in The Netherlands resulted in a successful five-year (1995-2000) national government campaign aimed at combating school violence (Mooij, 2005). Anti-bullying legislation exists in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland (McGuckin & Lewis, 2008). Closer to home, De Wet's (2007b) research on violence in Lesotho revealed the existence of learner-on-learner and educator-on-learner verbal and non-verbal (physical) abuse in schools in Lesotho. The author concluded that violence in schools in Lesotho seems to confirm the (continued) existence of gender-based discrimination and violent behaviour. Olaogun, Ayandiran and Oyeleye's (2005) research conducted in Nigerian schools sheds some light on the situation in that country, revealing that verbal abuse, physical assault and even rape and female genital mutilation characterise the violence perpetrated in Nigerian schools.

SCHOOL AND SCHOOL-RELATED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The link between violence in schools, communities and society

As early as 1995 Duncan and Rock indicated that violence had become endemic to South Africa (SA), mentioning that during the 1980s, schools “which are supposed to nurture growth and development, instead became sites of violence and conflict” (as cited in Lockhat & Van Niekerk, 2002). For many learners the situation has not changed much during the past 13 years, although the violence is no longer politically motivated. SA Students' Congress (SASCO) president, David Maimela, reacting to the shooting of a police officer by a Mpumalanga learner, asserted that the “violence experienced in schools is different to the one during apartheid. A specific strategy has to be implemented, but we don't want our schools to be militarised” (Tau, 2007). Despite the halcyon effects of the first democratic elections and the Mandela era, the situation has worsened for some learners and teachers, and the epithet “pits of

hopelessness and despair” (Lockhat & Van Niekerk, 2002) could still apply to a large number of SA schools.

Senosi (as cited in Maree, 2005) attributes the prevalence of violence in schools to unemployment, the rich/poor divide, the availability of firearms and patriarchal values and practices, which have influenced learners to the extent that they regard violence as “an acceptable form of expression and way of channelling their emotions”. Burton (2008b) recently found that learners’ school experiences mirror their experiences in their homes and the broader community. According to Ward (as cited in Burton, 2008a), the use of drugs, imprisonment of family members, learner-directed assault and robbery at home, are “significant variables in learners’ experiences of violence at school”, while more than a third of learners exposed to violence at home have also been victims of violence at school. In this regard Ward (as cited in Burton 2008a) states that the “ways in which children acquire violent repertoires can only be understood by exploring the ecology of contexts in which children grow up”.

Derksen and Strasburger (as cited in Lam & Liu, 2007), believe that increased youth violence can be ascribed to the influence of the media, which portray violence as an acceptable way of resolving conflict. Van Dyk (2007) blames South African society for “the scourge of our time”, i.e. SA’s spineless judicial and legal system and the lack of adequate political and economic leadership, as well as a lack of satisfactory leadership with regard to military, church, education and family matters, and states that “We are responsible”. Bloch (2008) concurs when he blames the “limitations of the wider society - from gangs to lack of books in the home” and entreats society to “rally around” because change “will never come only from above”.

Researchers have pointed out that schools should be “safe havens” which instil respect for human rights in learners (Neser, 2005). However, schools are currently “sites of exclusion and disappointment” instead of havens that should be “pointing the way to excellence and achievement for all” (Bloch, 2008). Siegel and Senna (as cited in Neser, 2005), define socialisation as the “process of learning the values and norms of society or the subculture to which the individual belongs”. Both primary and secondary socialisation are normally provided by the family, and school and peer groups respectively (Neser, 2005), but Lawrence (as cited in Neser, 2005), describes the school as the “basic conduit” which channels community and adult influences, thus elevating the school to become the “primary instrument of socialisation”. Colditz, the chairman of the Federation of School Governing Bodies, believes that the involvement of learners in murder should indicate to parents that they should “start doing something at home”, and that it is “up to parents to impart values to their children” (Naidu, 2007b).

The impact of violence on teachers and learners

Excellence in teaching and education can be achieved only in a safe environment that is conducive to the attainment of educational goals (Prinsloo & Neser, 2007b). Any factor that influences the safety situation at a school negatively, in turn impacts on learners' achievement negatively. The negative short- and long-term effects of school violence on learners have been well-documented, both with regard to victims and perpetrators. Victims often develop psychosomatic symptoms like stomach ache or headache, struggle to concentrate, feel isolated, are reluctant to attend school, develop feelings of depression and even display suicidal tendencies, while they could also

experience impaired relationships with their parents (De Wet, 2005; Prinsloo & Naser, 2007a).

There is a lack of research in SA on teachers as witnesses, perpetrators and victims of school violence, although staff victimisation has been included in research on school violence in other countries (De Wet, 2007; McGuckin & Lewis, 2008). In a recent incident in SA three learners who manipulated an image of two gay body-builders by substituting their heads with those of their school principal and former deputy principal and distributed it among learners via cell phone and a colour printout on a school notice board, have been ordered to pay R45 000 in damages. The former deputy principal who instituted the claim said the “core of the case is that teachers in this country should be treated with respect. They are not objects of ridicule” (Venter, 2008). In passing judgment, High Court Judge Ben du Plessis made reference to the discipline problems in schools and said that this, coupled with “the over-emphasizing of children’s rights to the detriment of teachers, compelled the observer of adolescent behaviour to be less accommodating ... in the interest of the children as well as the teachers and the community” (Venter, 2008). In yet another case of “educator-targeted bullying” (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006), a Motherwell teacher stayed away from school after a learner threatened to shoot the teacher after being scolded (Matyu, 2007). A more extreme case concerns the bleeding to death in a school corridor of Nokulunga Ndala, after being stabbed by a learner she accused of trying to cheat during a geography test. In this instance the learner said that “he stabbed her twice in the neck because she had humiliated him in front of his classmates” (Naidu, 2007b).

The levels of violence in schools have led to criticism of the abolition of corporal punishment in all schools since 1997 through the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Naidu, 2007b; Sunday Times: Teachers under too much stress, 2007). According to Naidu (2007a), this, coupled with the Children’s Act makes it nigh impossible for parents to maintain discipline “as children have a right to open a police docket against a parent”. In schools, teachers prefer to suffer in silence rather than risk becoming objects of derision by admitting they have lost power in the classroom. It is this loss of power, coupled with the fact that many teachers are unaware of the extent of incidents of violence among learners (Frisén, Holmqvist & Oscarsson, 2008; Kochendorfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Naylor et al., 2006; Williams & Cornell, 2006) that prevents teachers from taking a pro-active approach to both overt and covert forms of violence in their schools.

In a recent meeting with the President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, school principals called for the reintroduction of corporal punishment to restore order in schools (Liebenberg & Kruger, 2009). Some teachers believe that although corporal punishment was a “dehumanising and degrading practice ... it had its advantages” (Sunday Times: Teachers under too much stress, 2007), while others feel that it could be effective if “moderately meted out under the supervision of the school principal and an available member of the governing body, to avoid illegal forms of discipline” (Matyu, 2007). These opinions and the call for the reinstatement of corporal punishment are in stark contrast with Maree’s (2005) view of corporal punishment as a “scourge”, which is “in its essence, merely an institutionalised form of bullying”. This stance is highlighted by two recent incidents. In the first a teacher spanked a learner and allowed other learners to hit the learner who was (incorrectly) assumed to have thrown a stone at another learner. The teacher may not return to school until

after the departmental investigation and the court case (Rademeyer, 2009). In the second incident a learner attempted suicide through an overdose of tablets after being assaulted with a *sjambok* by the owner of the private school she attends. The owner of the school has denied this and other allegations, including the beating of other learners by himself and staff members. The Mpumalanga Department of Education refuses to intervene “because it is a private school and the police say their hands are tied, as there are no children or parents willing to lay a charge” (Govender, 2009).

AIM OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to determine the perceptions among teachers in the Pretoria region as well as student teachers at the University of Pretoria (UP) about the extent and impact of violence (including bullying), in schools and society at large, with a view to providing education departments with guidelines for dealing with this challenge.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article reports on an investigation into the perceptions among teachers in the Pretoria region as well as final-year student teachers at the University of Pretoria (UP) about the extent and impact of violence (including bullying), in schools and society at large, with a view to providing education departments with guidelines for dealing with challenges related to school violence.

The guiding questions are:

- What are teachers’ perceptions about the extent and impact of violence in schools in the Pretoria region?
- What are the perceptions of final-year student teachers about the extent and impact of violence in the schools in which they conducted their internship over a period of two school terms, and on the future of the country?
- How do teachers, final-year student teachers and learners deal with violence in schools?
- What should government and schools do to address violence in schools?

METHOD

Participants and setting

The participants consisted of 365 final-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) student teachers. As part of their final reflection procedure, they were, at the end of 2008, required to discuss the questions, which would in 2009 be used in the teacher interviews, in their internship school groups. The student leaders of these school groups were requested to write down their groups’ views on each question. The written versions of the reflections of the secondary schools student teachers (from a total of 34 schools) were used for this research.

In addition, a sample of four secondary schools in Pretoria, Gauteng, also used by the University of Pretoria for the purpose of undergraduate school-based practice (internship) placements, was selected as a convenience sample. The sample is also, in a sense, purposive, since schools from various socio-economic strata in different parts

of the city were selected, i.e. inner city, middle class and upper middle class suburban schools. The sample included three co-educational schools and one single-gender (boys') school. The sample is, to an extent, a random one, since school principals of the identified schools were asked to arrange for the researchers to interview any two to three teachers at each school during the teachers' free periods. Three teachers at the first school volunteered to participate, and were later joined by the deputy principal. At the second and third schools two teachers participated in each interview, and at the fourth school one. A total of five female and four male teachers participated in the interviews.

Instrument

Teachers and student teachers responded to a semi-structured questionnaire compiled by the authors.

Mode of inquiry

The mode of enquiry is qualitative and includes an interactive survey using open-ended questions.

Data collection

The literature study on various forms of violence in schools, the student teachers' written group reflections on the open-ended interview questions and the interviewees' oral replies and discussions based on the same open-ended interview questions constitute the qualitative data. In addition to the interviews and ensuing discussions, the teachers who were amenable to the suggestion, were afforded an opportunity to state what they regarded as the crux of their views regarding school violence in their schools, while being videotaped. Of the nine interviewees four agreed to be videotaped.

Student teachers' written group reflections on the interview questions were typed and data from teachers' interviews were added so that the data pertaining to each interview question could be perused in order to isolate the most common themes per interview question from the teacher and student teacher data respectively.

Data analysis

The investigation was based on an interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) involving understanding and interpreting meanings as they are revealed during interactions. The research design was qualitative in nature (Creswell, 2007; Durrheim, 1999).

The qualitative data sources² consisted of (i) videotapes and audio-recordings, (ii) observation by the researchers (Cohen, Manion & Morriison, 2000), which was documented in field notes and a research diary (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997), (iii) conversational data during the interaction between the participants and researchers, which were videotaped, recorded and transcribed, and (iv) the researchers' journals which contained the researchers' reflections of each session.

For the purpose of data analysis, the documented data were organised, and categories, themes and patterns identified. The data were evaluated and categorised (Creswell,

² Owing to space constraints, not all data is reported on or integrated into the results.

2007) and, finally, the identified categories were compared with existing knowledge (i.e. literature) on violence.

Ensuring the reliability of the inquiry

Reliability was ensured in the study by applying various strategies during both data collection and data analysis (see Table 1).

Table 1

Strategies to increase and enhance trustworthiness during data collection and analysis

Credibility	<p>Triangulation – many types of evidence were collected for diverging and converging of evidence (Golafshani, 2003; Stake, 2005).</p> <p>Prolonged engagement in the field – numerous observations were made across different times and places.</p> <p>Continuous observation of the participants was carried out during the research phases.</p> <p>All data were coded independently by an external coder in order to ensure that the identified themes were an accurate representation of the data.</p> <p>Crystallisation³ – The focus was on complex patterns and themes that emerged during the data collection and analysis in order to enhance a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.</p>
Dependability	<p>The data were coded independently by an external coder in order to enhance their accuracy.</p> <p><i>Verbatim</i> accounts were produced (low inference descriptor).</p>
Confirmability	<p>The data obtained, the methods used and the decisions made during the project were thoroughly documented.</p>
Transferability	<p>Observations were documented in research diaries.</p> <p>Detailed descriptions of the particular setting of the participants and the techniques used were provided – sufficient information was given on the context of events for readers to judge the applicability of the findings to other known settings.</p>
<p>(Compiled from Creswell, 2003:196-197; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997:407-409)</p>	

Limitations of the study

The limitations of the study include the following:

- The scope of the study was limited.
- No standardised questionnaires were used in the research.
- The research group was limited to teachers and students in a number of schools in Pretoria. Generalisation of the results would therefore not be valid for either Gauteng or for SA as such an exercise would require a more comprehensive study.
- Another researcher could well interpret the results in a different manner.

³ The authors are aware that many researchers believe that triangulation and crystallisation should not both be referred to in one study. However, in following the example of researchers such as Bar-On (2007), Jansen (2007) and Elias (2007), both strategies are used in this study.

Ethical aspects

The relevant university as well as faculty authorities and students were consulted and written permission was obtained prior to the gathering of any information by means of the semi-structured questionnaire. Teachers and students were informed about the aim of the research project and they were requested to give their permission for the publication of the research results.

FINDINGS

The questions asked during the open-ended interviews with teachers and during the student teacher reflections form the framework for reporting the main findings derived from the emergent themes listed below (see Table 2). The discussed “Reflections” and “Interviews” are derived from the tables.

Table 2

Interview questions and main themes derived from teacher and student teacher feedback

1. What is the extent of violence in your school and the school community?	
Themes generated from teacher interviews 1.1 In suburban schools violence occurs mainly outside the school. 1.2 In inner city schools violence is prevalent in and outside the school.	Themes generated from student teacher group reflections 1.1 In suburban schools violence occurs mainly outside the school. 1.2 Violence occurs <i>in</i> inner city schools. 1.3 There is a high level of learner on learner, learner on teacher and teacher on learner violence.
2. How do you feel about the impact of violence on teachers and learners?	
Themes generated from teacher interviews 2.1 Teachers have become complacent. 2.2 Violence instils fear and aggression.	Themes generated from student teacher group reflections 2.1 Teachers do not take action because they're afraid of the consequences. 2.2 Violence impacts negatively on teachers and learners.
3. How does your school deal with challenges regarding violence?	
Themes generated from teacher interviews 3.1 Codes of conduct are negotiated with learners. 3.2 The school tries to instil respect. 3.3 School liaises with the South African Police Service (SAPS). 3.4 Teachers deal with it as part of their job. 3.5 Specific teachers target violence. 3.6 Psychologists and peer groups are involved.	Themes generated from student teacher group reflections 3.1 Discipline policies and codes of conduct are used. 3.2 Through excellent security measures. 3.3 Issues are dealt with in life orientation classes. 3.4 Schools liaise with the SAPS.
4. How do you and the learners deal with violence?	
Themes generated from teacher interviews 4.1 Learners are afraid and they become angry. 4.2 Learners cannot deal with it due to lack of parental support. 4.3 Learners use a buddy system. 4.4 The tutor and peer counselling systems help them.	Themes generated from student teacher group reflections 4.1 Teachers are afraid. 4.2 Learners and teachers are aware of policies. 4.3 Zero tolerance is best. 4.4 Appoint a disciplinarian.
5. How do you feel about the future of the country and the impact of violence?	
Themes generated from teacher interviews 5.1 There is no hope: schools and country are rife with intimidation. 5.2 There is a future, but only if government starts doing something. 5.3 Violence will get worse.	Themes generated from student teacher group reflections 5.1 Violence spills from schools into society and vice versa. 5.2 Parents should take responsibility. 5.3 The solution lies in teaching learners values.
6. In your opinion, what should be done by government and the schools to address the problem of violence?	
Themes generated from teacher interviews 6.1 We need leaders who can be respected and trusted. 6.2 Schools require professional counsellors. 6.3 The education department should supply user-friendly guidelines and send out a strong message to learners and parents.	Themes generated from student teacher group reflections 6.1 Code of honour. 6.2 Bring back corporal punishment. 6.3 Counselling.

6.4 Bring back respect. 6.5 The department should empower schools. 6.6 The code of honour is important. 6.7 Deal harshly with offenders.	6.4 Awareness workshops. 6.5 Involve parents. 6.6 Liaise with the police.
7. Do you think teachers are equipped to deal with school violence?	
Themes generated from teacher interviews 7.1 Teachers feel they have no rights. 7.2 Teachers are not equipped to deal with violence.	Themes generated from student teacher group reflections 7.1 Teachers are not equipped to deal with violence in schools. 7.2 No, empower teachers.
8. Would you like to add anything else?	
Themes generated from teacher interviews 8.1 Perpetrators of violence have more rights than victims. 8.2 Learners have more rights than teachers. 8.3 Learners should form part of an anti-violence strategy. 8.4 Escalating civil disobedience is at the root of our problems. 8.5 Schools reflect society. 8.6 Our education system is not successful. 8.7 We have missed the boat.	Themes generated from student teacher group reflections 8.1 Less theory and more practical classes on dealing with discipline. 8.2 Violence begins at home. 8.3 Most student teachers left the section blank and a number complained about certain modules and offered no information on school violence.

Responses to the questions (in italics) are provided and analysed:

What is the extent of violence in your school and the school community?

In answering question 1, both teachers and student teachers indicated that physical violence rarely occurs inside suburban schools. When violence occurs, it happens outside the school grounds, mostly in the form of non-learner attacks, sometimes involving gangs. There have been incidences of theft leading to attacks outside schools.

With regard to inner city schools, teachers and student teachers also agreed that violence occurs mainly inside the schools, but that there are incidents of violence outside the schools too. Teachers at an inner city school remarked that most incidents occurred between girls and often involved the use of scissors as weapons, the “nastiness of girls can become very damaging amongst the learners” (Reflection 17). Incidents often result from relationship issues among couples or friends, from learners “accusing” one another of being HIV positive or because of difficult home circumstances, e.g. parents divorcing. Some student teachers indicated that many learners use violence to solve issues: “They see violence as the only solution” (Reflection 6), and many have found that “violence at home plays a major role” (Reflection 11; Interview 1).

According to the student teachers there is a large degree of learner-on-learner or learner-on-teacher violence. The result is that both learners and teachers “are afraid to go to school” (Reflection 12). Many learners and teachers who feel threatened have left their schools to escape to safer schools. Student teachers observed that in some inner city schools teachers who feel helpless also resort to violence against learners, because they feel that “learners have gotten out of hand and they don’t know how to fix it all” (Reflection 15).

What is your opinion about the impact of violence on teachers and learners?

Both teachers and student teachers found that teachers do not always take action when they become aware of incidents of violence. Some teachers are of the opinion that

those who do not take action have become complacent, while the student teachers feel that teachers do not take action because they fear the consequences. Teachers in some schools are afraid to enforce discipline for fear of gang vengeance and are constantly “on tenterhooks about what they say and do in order to avoid conflict” (Reflection 24).

Student teachers also indicated that even teachers and learners who are not direct victims of violence are affected emotionally. Furthermore, school violence not only affects teachers’ and learners’ perception of security, but “tension arises between parents and teachers/schools” as a result of such violence (Reflection 13).

How does your school deal with challenges regarding violence?

The majority of schools surveyed have implemented strict policies on discipline, codes of conduct as well as stringent security measures which, combined, or separately, serve as a deterrent and are aimed at promoting good and respectful behaviour among learners and teachers. In addition, certain issues, e.g. relationships and bullying, are dealt with in talks by principals and in life orientation classes. Large numbers of teachers deal with violence as part of their everyday tasks, and in some schools specific teachers are designated to deal with violence. A number of schools have relatively recently implemented peer counselling to counter all forms of violence. To this end, the SAPS offers training courses at schools biannually. At one such school, which also has a staff member appointed as disciplinarian, the Grade 12 learners – self-appointed custodians – report negative issues to their grade tutor: “The reporting is linked to their relationship with their grade tutor who has been their tutor since their lower grades” (Interview 3). Other schools confiscate all weapons and use security cameras, a debit system, disciplinary hearings and suspension to address the challenges posed by violence; however, these measures are rarely successful. Many learners just do not arrive for the detention class after school and some taunt the teachers which leaves them feeling disempowered (Interview 4, 5; Reflection 6, 18). Some teachers have begun to turn a blind eye to incidents of violence because they feel that their attempts to address the issue are futile. A number of student teacher reflections indicate that because teachers often fear reprisal from gangs, individual learners or parents, the punishment often does not fit the transgression. Certain schools even have their own attorneys who deal with matters arising from incidents of violence and issues related to disciplinary measures. One school addresses discipline and violence issues by means of an “outing for undisciplined learners – and takes them to the prison for awareness” (Reflection 19).

How do you and the learners deal with violence?

The answers in this section are closely linked to those to questions two and three. Despite an awareness of policy many learners and teachers are unable to deal effectively with violence, with the result that they become angry and fearful: “We feel unsafe, our hands are tied” (Reflection 1), while others “take it in their stride” (Interview 6) and discuss incidents with learners to “understand the reasoning for it and learn through these experiences to minimize chances of it happening again” (Reflection 17; also Reflection 25). In one inner city school teachers avoid using violence themselves in order to model appropriate behaviour aimed at reducing the

cycle of violence among learners: “... and if you do this the learners will see that you can solve problems without violence” (Reflection 23).

The lack of parental involvement in some (especially inner city) schools is an exacerbating factor: “... they are not always involved enough to do something about the problem” (Interview 5) and in other schools “many parents refuse to believe that their children are guilty of using drugs or perpetrating school violence and bullying” (Interview 2). Despite the fact that most schools implement strict policies on discipline and codes of conduct, student teachers’ perception is that they do not really work: “... to be honest with you, it doesn’t really help at all” (Reflection 21; also Reflections 4 and 6).

What is your opinion about the future of the country and the impact of violence?

Teachers indicated that the high levels of intimidation in the country, resulting mainly from the lack of homogeneity, e.g. xenophobic attacks and political violence due to the (then) coming election spilled over into schools. They felt that government needed to take responsibility to prevent the levels of violence from escalating (Interviews 3; 5 and 6). Student teacher reflections mirrored teachers’ feelings to a large extent (Reflections 5, 7, 9, 10, 16, and 21). Some student teachers believe that violence is spilling over from the schools into wider society, and that the solution is to work together, “to start at home” (Reflections 3, 9, 16 and 26) by encouraging parents to take responsibility for their children, while others believe that the violence in the country, e.g. xenophobia and politics, spills over into the schools (Reflections 5 and 8). This is highlighted by the following comment from teachers: “The message on TV is that if you have a problem, you should get rid of the person who causes it” (Interviews 5 and 6). Student teachers also believe that government should take responsibility, because “as long as government just changes street and city names and doesn’t focus on solving violence, the future looks dark” (Reflection 9).

In your opinion, what should be done by government and the schools to address the problem of violence?

With regard to possible action by government and schools, teachers feel that government should appoint leaders who could be respected and trusted, and that schools should be empowered through the services of professional counsellors. They also feel that there should be a strong message sent from government to learners and parents, and that offenders should be dealt with harshly. Furthermore, teachers believe that mutual respect is essential and that a code of honour should be applied in schools. Like the teachers, most student teacher groups emphasise the value of a code of honour and the need for counsellors: “We feel that government should come up with some solid strategies to protect both teachers and learners at schools” (Reflection 21). A number of student teachers favour the return of corporal punishment, while others believe that awareness workshops and greater parent involvement would have a positive effect.

Do you think teachers are equipped to deal with school violence?

The following comment underscores the general feeling: “Learners think they have all the rights” (Reflection 16). With regard to dealing with school violence, some

teachers feel they are equipped through disciplinary systems and the appointment of disciplinarians, while others believe they are not at all equipped and that professional counsellors should be appointed. Most student teacher groups are adamant that teachers are not sufficiently equipped, that conflict management should be included in their teacher education modules, and that all teachers should have access to workshops on coping with violence in schools so that they can be empowered to deal with school violence.

Would you like to add anything?

Teachers feel strongly that perpetrators of violence and learners have more rights than victims, and that learners should form part of anti-violence strategies in schools. Teachers furthermore believe that escalating civil disobedience is at the root of the problem and that schools merely reflect the wider society, showing that the South African education system is a failure and that, in fact, “we have missed the boat” (Interview).

A small number of student teachers believe that violence begins in the home and that it should be addressed there, while others used the opportunity to request the inclusion in their university curriculum of more practical classes on dealing with school violence. A number of students provided unrelated information or did not answer this section.

CONCLUSION

The research under discussion suggests that the extent of violence in some inner city schools is greater than in suburban schools, where it occurs mainly outside the school grounds. Violence in a number of inner city schools is more prevalent among girls than among boys and often involves the use of weapons, such as scissors. Learners sometimes regard violence as the only way to resolve issues and often model it on what they learn at home in this regard. Violence in schools is also, however, sometimes perpetrated by teachers who are unable to discipline learners effectively. Furthermore, school violence exacerbates feelings of insecurity and fear among learners and teachers, who sometimes stay away from or even leave their schools because of their exposure to it.

The vast majority of learners and teachers appear to be in need of encouragement, help and support, both emotionally and spiritually. We were therefore puzzled to learn that very little use is made of psychologists (who are in very short supply). In fact, recent research (Elias, Maree & Oakland, 2009) suggests that the psychological support system in the education department has all but disappeared (a psychologist is sent to a school only if between three and ten learners require assistance at the same time). We thus strongly recommend that the immediate introduction of a year of compulsory community service for all graduating teachers and educational psychologists to alleviate learners’ and teachers’ counselling and other needs be considered by the Minister of Education. However, it is equally important to ensure that these teachers and psychologists teach and practice in rural and township schools in particular – *and to provide appropriate incentives (safety, financial and otherwise), to make it safe, attractive and inviting for them to venture into deep rural regions and township schools.* Not only will such a step alleviate the current shortages in the field:

it has the potential to impact significantly on relationships across the diversity divide and promote better understanding of the idiosyncratic needs of all communities.

Despite various measures implemented by schools, violence is rife and many teachers as well as learners feel powerless. Yet, in some schools, despite the lack of psychological services, but with the assistance of appointed disciplinarians, peer counsellors and the SAPS, staff and learners are able to cope with the challenge.

Overall it may be stated that although learners and teachers try to deal with violence effectively, they are fearful and feel disempowered. Discipline policies appear to be ineffective to a large extent, and the level of parent involvement is not conducive to helping teachers and learners deal with violence. Teachers and student teachers alike agree that violence in society affects schools and that parents and government need to take responsibility for addressing the issue to engender positive attitudes generally, and especially among teachers and student teachers. In addition, teachers and student teachers believe that well-implemented codes of conduct could make a major difference in schools. They also believe that government leaders should set an example and that government should implement measures such as professional counselling and corporal punishment, while schools should offer workshops, liaise closely with the SAPS and involve parents to a greater extent.

For the most part, our findings correlate positively with the views expressed by Kollapen (2006), Nesor (2006), Prinsloo (2006) and Prinsloo and Nesor (2007a). Violence in society at large seems to impact educationally and psychologically significantly on the situation in our schools in a number of ways. Whereas the vast majority of teachers and learners expressed grave concern (and fear) about ever-increasing levels of violence in society and the future of the country, a number of voices seemed to suggest that the situation in some schools borders on the need for deep concern. Kollapen's (2006) view that it is impossible to receive quality education in an atmosphere of fear, assumes specific significance against this background. Where violence is concerned, we also concur with his view that the country appears to be in a crisis that deserves the immediate attention of all stakeholders.

One final comment should suffice here: The researchers are aware of the fact that many teachers and parents have recently pleaded for the re-introduction of corporal punishment in an effort to curb learner-on-learner and learner-on-teacher violence. However, they remain vehemently opposed to this inhumane and degrading form of discipline, which has no place in post-modern society, for the very reasons expressed elsewhere (Maree, 2005; Maree & Cherian, 2004). The opinion held by the researchers is that this particular form of violence against children will, in fact, contribute to and exacerbate the unacceptably high levels of violence in our crime-saturated country.

Lastly: The researchers firmly believe that the ever-escalating spiral of violence at all levels in South Africa has the potential to destroy South African society. The vicious and destructive cycle that feeds on itself (violence → fear → violence, hatred and anxiety → retribution (or an increase in the possibility that victims might develop pathology) → more violence/ developing more pathology must be broken soon. Otherwise there is little hope of a bright future.

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