An analysis of family-school collaboration in preventing adolescent violence in urban secondary schools

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The purpose of this article is to describe how school staff members, learners and parents collaborate to prevent adolescent learner violence in two different urban secondary schools. The increase in acts of interpersonal learner violence has a destructive effect on the safe and positive development of young people. Empirical evidence indicates that successfully addressing the issues that can contribute to the development of interpersonal violence requires taking into account the developmental stages of the learners as well as exploring the impact of the learner's immediate social environment. A qualitative descriptive and exploratory case study, rooted in the sociological interpretive research paradigm, was conducted to explore how school staff members, learners and parents collaborate to prevent learner violence at two urban secondary schools. Contrary to current belief, the participating learners explicitly expressed their need for the support and guidance of their parents and also the school staff members in withstanding the peer and societal pressures that can result in their acting in aggressive or violent ways at school.

Introduction

Considerable research has explored the school context in an effort to identify the risk factors contributing to academic failure and anti-social behaviour in schools. However, there are major areas that still need to be addressed, including research into the school climate as it relates to the extent that school staff members either promote or undermine positive learner development and effective family-school partnerships (Furlong, Morrison, Cornell & Skiba, 2004). Much of the responsibility for violence prevention falls on the shoulders of teachers who may themselves feel ill equipped to fulfil this responsibility or who may fear the behaviour of their own learners (Kollapan, 2006). A general conclusion in several reviews of positive youth promotion is that there is a need for a more comprehensive prevention approach which should include families and caregivers (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Christie, Nelson & Jolivette, 2004; Smith & Sandu, 2004). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), taking a person-in-context approach to violence prevention allows for a more complete understanding of the development and prevention of aggression among the youth. The main goal of the current study was two-fold: firstly to explore and describe how school staff members, learners and parents collaborate to prevent violence in urban secondary schools and secondly, to provide these stakeholders with a better understanding of the multi-faceted problem of addressing school violence, which should guide them in adopting appropriate strategies for preventing violence. The focus of this article is directed by the following research question: *"How do school staff members, learners and parents collaborate to prevent violence in urban secondary schools?"* The purpose of this article is to describe how school staff members, learners and their parents collaborated to prevent violence in two different urban secondary schools.

Conceptualisation: youth violence, school climate and family-school collaboration

The definition of youth violence that was adopted for this study is that of *The World Report on Violence and Health* (2002), namely "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, exerted by or against children, adolescents or young adults, aged 10 to 29, which results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (in Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi & Lozano, 2002:5). Youth violence includes aggressive behaviour (i.e. verbal abuse, bullying, hitting or fighting) as well as serious violent or delinquent acts such as aggravated assault, robbery, rape and homicide (Mercy, Butchart, Farrington & Cerdá, 2002). Tangiuri (1968) defines climate as the total environmental quality within an organisation, consisting of the following four dimensions: ecology (physical and material aspects), milieu (social dimensions created by characteristics of groups of people), culture (social dimensions created by belief systems, values, cognitive structures and meaning), and social system (social dimensions created by the relationships of people and groups) (Tangiuri, 1968:2 in Anderson, 1982:368-420). In the context of this study, the term school climate was used for explaining the interrelatedness and interdependence of all the dimensions of the school, namely its ecology, milieu, culture and existing social systems, as suggested by Tangiuri (1968). As Boyd (1992) explains, bringing all these dimensions of the school together creates its environment or context. According to Cowan and his colleagues (2004), a common definition of the term collaboration is to work together towards a common goal or set of goals. Family-school collaboration is a reciprocal dynamic process which occurs among systems (e.g. families, schools) and/or individuals (e.g. parents, educators) who cooperate in making decisions toward common goals and solutions related to learners (Cowan, Swearer & Sheridan, 2004:201). In the context of this study, the influence that the collaborative efforts among the school staff members, learners and their families had on the prevention of violence was explored. The whole school and community could collaboratively develop positive links with each other to establish a multi-disciplinary networking approach to combating violence in secondary schools, which could result in safer schools and communities (Kgobe & Mbokazi, 2008)

Theoretical framework: Eco-systemic perspective

The theoretical lens through which the research was contextualised includes the typology of youth violence combined with an eco-systemic perspective, which is an integration of systems as well as ecological theories. Systems theory in its broadest sense is the interdisciplinary study of social organisations, such as schools (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002). In the context of this study, the school as a system is regarded as a set of units with the capacity to interact within the scope of the school, family and community environments. These interactions influence all the different parts of the system. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Child Development (1979) explains child development as happening within four nested systems, namely micro, meso, exo and macro systems. Interpersonal violence viewed in the ecological framework is seen as the outcome of the interaction among factors at all four of these levels, namely individuals, close relationships, communities and society. Therefore, from an eco-systemic perspective, the way that the adolescent learner behaves and develops will be influenced by his/her relationships with school staff members, peers, family members and community members (ecological theory) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:2005). The internal characteristics of an adolescent and the external barriers in the systems in the environment (i.e. home and school) continuously develop and interact with one another (systems theory) (Von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Research design and methodology

The specific research design selected was an exploratory and descriptive case study of a qualitative nature and was aimed at providing an in-depth description of the case (Creswell, 2002). As an interpretive, inductive form of research, case studies explore the details and meanings of experiences and do not usually attempt to test a prior hypothesis. Instead, we attempted to identify important patterns and themes in the data. A case study examines a case in detail by employing multiple sources of data found in the

settings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). We elected to conduct an in-depth investigation into the effect that collaborative efforts among school staff members, learners and their parents have on preventing learner violence in the urban secondary school setting.

Purposeful selection strategies

McMillan and Schumacher (2006) suggest that if the research focus is on a complex micro process (such as school-based learner violence), the sites should be purposefully selected to locate the people involved in that particular phenomenon. The rationale for purposefully choosing two secondary schools in the area where we reside was that although they are situated in the same urban area, their learner populations come from vastly different socio-economic backgrounds as well as representing different racial compositions. The first school is a public, co-educational, English-medium secondary school situated in a middle to lower income residential area. The second school is a co-educational English-medium private school situated in an affluent residential area. According to Durlak and colleagues (2007), the nature of adolescent violence can be linked to the community in which a school is situated (Durlak, Taylor, Kawashima, Pachan, DuPre, Celio *et al.,* 2007). Empirical evidence indicates that more violent incidents happen at urban secondary schools (Leoschut & Burton, 2006). It was important to select participants from all the stakeholders at both school sites, as each of these subsystems plays an integral role in the school system. Therefore, the population units of analysis for this study included five selected school staff members, a class of Grade 9 learners (N = 22, 16 respectively) and six parents from each school. The rationale for choosing specifically Grade 9 learners was that empirical evidence suggests that the age for the highest risk of the initiation of serious violent behaviour is between 15 and 16 years (Grade 9) (Elliot, 1994). A combination of purposeful sampling strategies was employed to select information-rich cases for in-depth study. The selection strategies included criterion sampling and snowball sampling. The goal was not to generalise the findings to a population, but to obtain insight into the phenomenon by purposefully selecting individuals to maximise understanding as well as being willing to participate (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data collection strategies

As qualitative research is concerned with understanding social phenomena from the participants' perspectives, we employed multi-method strategies to obtain valid data from the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). After gaining entry to the two school sites, initial in-depth, semi-structured pilot interviews were conducted with the two principals at both sites. This enabled the researchers to build rapport with them and to evaluate the applicability of the Interview Guide. A four-phase sequential data collection process was followed, in which data were collected from different sources using multiple methods at both the respective schools. In phase one, the researchers conducted key informant interviews with four selected Grade 9 teachers at both schools, using the Interview Guide (Polkinghorne, 2005). Group interviews were conducted with a class of Grade 9 learners at both school sites in phase two. Individual, dyad and triad interviews with six parents at both school sites were conducted in phase three. All interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed (*verbatim*) and incorporated into the data analysis process. The data collection process was concluded by reviewing school documents pertaining to the collaborative nature of the school violence prevention strategies (i.e. School Prospectus, Code of Conduct, Grade 9 Life Orientation Curriculum, Health and Safety Policy). Comparing the various data sources provided a balanced and multi-faceted inquiry, resulting in enhancing the trustworthiness of the study (Bryman, 2008).

Data analysis procedures: Framework approach

To give a transparent account of the analytical process we analysed the data manually by following the specific qualitative analytical steps of the *"Framework Approach"* described by Ritchie and colleagues (2003). This approach develops a hierarchical thematic framework which is used to classify and organise the data according to key themes, concepts and emergent categories (Ritchie, Spencer & O'Conner 2003:219). The researchers applied constant comparative content analysis to select, categorise, compare

and interpret the collected data from the semi-structured in-depth interviews and the group interviews. The research questions, interview guide, theoretical frameworks, prior knowledge gained through the literature review and the data themselves were used as a guide in coding and interpreting the data. Reviewing and analysing the two schools' documents provided triangulation of the data and concluded the data analysis process (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Rigour and ethical considerations

Graneheim and Ludman (2004) suggest that credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability should be applied when reporting findings after conducting qualitative content analysis, as was the case in the current study. The triangulation of data collection methods and sources and the use of "member checking" increased the credibility or internal validity of the study (Bryman, 2008:377). We provided enough descriptions so that readers would be able to determine how closely their situations matched the research situation, and hence whether the findings could be transferred (Merriam, 1998). Adopting an auditing process by keeping complete records for peer review added to the dependability of the study. Stakeholder reports contributed to the confirmability of the study by indicating that possible researcher bias did not sway the research findings (Bryman, 2008). As Strydom (in De Vos 2002:66) indicates, it is important to develop an appropriate informed procedure for obtaining consent for each investigation. Before starting our fieldwork, we obtained written informed consent from the Department of Education, the Principals and Governing Bodies of both the selected schools as well as ethical clearance from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria. The purposefully selected school staff members, Grade 9 learners and parents were given Participant Information Letters describing the purpose of the study and the intended use of the data as well as requesting their voluntary participation. Informed written consent was obtained from all three population units of analysis as well as proxy consent from the parents/guardians of the minor learners who participated in the focus groups. Confidentiality and anonymity were respected and adhered to during and on completion of the study. Anonymity was achieved by using pseudonyms as well as by analysing and publishing the data in ways that ensured confidentiality.

Analysis and synthesis of research findings

Five main themes emerged from the qualitative analytical steps of the Framework Approach (Ritchie *et al.,* 2003), during which constant comparative analysis and interpretation were used, as depicted in Table 1. However, for the purpose of this article, we discuss only the main research findings as they pertain to Theme 1: school climate and culture, Theme 3: violence prevention strategies, and Theme 4: family-school collaboration, by including examples from the raw data. The raw data are the direct quotes obtained from the individual and group interviews with the participants. The thematic framework is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Thematic framework (code families/categories)

Theme 1: School climate and culture: • School culture • Teacher-learner relationship • Family-school collaboration • School safety • Learner behaviour • School building and grounds
Theme 2: Violent learner behaviour
Theme 3: Violence prevention strategies: • Physical security measures • Code of conduct and disciplinary procedures • Learner involvement and support systems • Staff supervision and training • Parent-teacher communication

Theme 4: Family-school collaboration: • Parent involvement   • Learner voice and connectedness   • Barriers to collaboration   • Strategies to promote collaboration
Theme 5: Suggtestions fo addressing school-based violence

Theme 1: School climate and culture

School culture; teacher-learner relationships; family-school collaboration; school safety; learner behaviour and school building and grounds.

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Ecological Theory describes the school as a microsystem within which the adolescent learner spends considerable time interacting with teachers and peers in a reciprocal manner to help construct this microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Learners spend many years as members of this small society. The school exerts a tremendous influence on the learners' socio-emotional development and the school environment increases in size and complexity as the learner interacts with more culturally diverse people. Secondary-school learners are more aware of the school as a social system and might be motivated to conform to it or to challenge it (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefde & Davis-Kearn, 2006). Within this lay the main differences between School One and School Two regarding the school climate and culture. Factors contributing to these differences were the size of the schools, the diversity of the learner populations, the extent of parental involvement and the disciplinary policy structures. At School One the consensus among the participants was that the enhancement of the security measures and good discipline structures, combined with a leadership that followed a more liberal approach, had a positive impact on the overall school climate. However, the school staff members found the learner diversity and school size (approximately 1 000 learners) a major challenge in managing learner behaviour. The diverse cultures, religions and beliefs tend to create inter-cultural tension that may at times result in aggressive or violent behaviour. As one educator explained:

> Although they are safe in this environment we must never under-estimate the fact that we have a melting pot at the secondary school ... You have children who under normal circumstances would not be getting along, who are now sharing the same academic space and that I think is the main reason why we are having instances of bullying and verbal threatening taking place on school property because you have different cultures, different languages, different beliefs, all caught up in a little secluded space and they now have to get along (Interview MV, 5-6).

Some teachers found it difficult to accommodate the very diverse group of learners and sometimes felt threatened by them. The learners described the relationship among themselves as good, but stated that idle threats could make them feel scared. Disruptive learners, peer pressure and rumours about their school having naughty, disrespectful learners sometimes made the learners experience the school climate as negative. The parents and school staff members felt that parent involvement was lacking at the school. The school staff members believed that the parents were not aware that they were stakeholders in their children's education. As one educator stated:

> When you look at the parents it is a great concern of mine ... this school is not a crèche ... this is one aspect that is lacking (Interview MV, 2).

The learners, although wanting more independence, would like to see their parents involved in their school life to some extent. At School Two the parents and learners felt happy and described the school as a family within a very caring community. As one educator explained:

> ... we have always prided ourselves in just the whole business of traditional values along with innovative teaching and we have a uniform, we have respect for and a pride in our new school. It is community-based so not only are the children known to us, as members of staff, but many of the families know each other so that adds a great deal to the sense of security within the school (Interview BC, 2).

The learners believed that the positive school climate contributed to good learner integration and they said there was good camaraderie among learners and school staff members. Overall the school climate was described as relaxed and positive. One parent stated:

> *You know I think there is a culture of caring, I think there is and there always has been right from the very beginning; because we are a small community school everybody knows one another. The teachers know the kids well and I think there is a culture of caring and I think it does filter down (Interview BPM, 12).*

The good security measures at the school as well as the feeling that the staff and learners could trust one another added to the learners' feeling of being safe at school. The ethos of the school encouraged learners to conduct themselves in a manner that demonstrated self-discipline and the staff members expected the learners to uphold the dignity of their peers, and to have pride in their school (Code of Conduct, 2009b:3). The learners experienced no discrimination or serious bullying and believed that the seniors looked after the younger ones. Some learners explained:

> *Yes, I think it is good because like the teachers they tell us that we can come to them if we have any problems of bullying or anything else so yes, we can trust them with anything (Interview BA3, 3).*

> *There is freedom of speech so you are able to talk to whomever about anything that you are having troubles with (Interview BA2, 2).*

The parents regarded the positive and warm school atmosphere as resulting in good learner behaviour. These findings confirm what has been found by numerous school climate researchers, namely that the size of the school, its location, the ethnic distribution and discipline policy all play a role in the amount, type and severity of aggressive learner behaviour (Dwyer, Osher & Hoffman, 2000). The "personality" of the school as it relates to the school climate may also contribute to the anti-social behaviours in youth (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Sprag10 and Walker (2005) argue that just as schools can be part of the path of violence, they can also provide a positive school climate that fosters supportive and effective bonds with their learners and parents, in turn resulting in positive youth growth and development as seems to be the case at School Two in particular.

Theme 3: Violence prevention strategies

Physical security measures; code of conduct and disciplinary procedures; learner involvement and support systems; staff supervision and training and parent-teacher communication.

The defining feature of the Social Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) is that it takes into account the physical environment and its relationship to people at individual, interpersonal (relationships), organisational (i.e. school) and community levels. The philosophical underpinning is the concept that behaviour does not occur in a vacuum but that anti-social or pro-social learner behaviour is influenced by interpersonal, social, cultural and physical environment variables. Lindstrom (2006) argues that it is imperative for school violence prevention efforts to aim at changing both the individual and the context in which the individual acts. According to the school staff members at School One, upgrading the physical safety measures at the school (i.e. palisade perimeter fence, CCTV and security guards), the enclosed layout of the school building as well as issuing access cards to learners had a positive effect on the learners' behaviour. However, the negative side to all these security measures was that the learners had no outlet for their energy and frustration, which could contribute to aggressive behaviour. The Code of Conduct (2009a:6-7) was implemented to promote positive discipline and clearly states that the school has a policy of maintaining general order and discipline regarding acceptable learner behaviour and that a policy of "zero tolerance" is taken towards illegal and anti-social learner behaviour. The learners stated that the Code of Conduct was too cumbersome and they would also like an opportunity to discuss the content and voice their opinion regarding certain rules they disagreed with. As one learner argued:

Ma'am I think with the Code of Conduct it is not right, they should make up rules together with us. Then we can decide on the rules we want. That is why we break the rules because there are things in there that we do not agree with then we still do it then that is why Ma'am (Interview ML13, 37).

The school staff members regarded the role of the school councillors (RCLs) in preventing learner violence as very successful. However, the learners felt that many of the RCLs were ineffective in stopping fighting and bullying, because many learners were chosen to become school councillors because they were popular, not because they had good leadership qualities. Some of them also undermined the school rules by participating in illegal or inappropriate behaviour. The staff members shared best practice among themselves but some teachers felt that not all staff members were well prepared for their lessons, which could result in learners becoming unruly and disruptive in the next class. They were very appreciative of the role that the School Governing Body (SGB) played but they found it difficult to build reciprocal relationships with many parents. At School Two, the school staff members and parents agreed that the physical security measures were adequate but that easy access at the entrance gate, the open-plan design of the school, as well as the lack of security measures at reception made the school vulnerable. All the participants concurred that the rules, regulations and consequences were clearly stated in the Code of Conduct (2009b) and that the learners were well aware that incidents of bullying or any other behavioural misconduct were taken seriously at their school. The Code of Conduct (2009b) was perceived as an essential document for the successful running of the school and as being based on democratic principles and fundamental rights, such as non-discrimination, non-violence, equity and participation. The school staff members regarded the role of the Grade 12 councillors as very important in the daily running of the school. A specific Grade Tutor staff member is also allocated to each grade, and stays with his/her specific group until Grade 12. The Grade Tutor assists learners through transition phases and provides postural and discipline guidance. The school staff members believed that an informed parent was an equipped parent. As one educator explained:

I think it is essential that parents be kept in the loop with regards to everything that is happening in schools. Now I think it is essential that we have those one-on-one meetings with parents where we inform them. I think it is essential that you have that connection between the parents and the schools, purely because an informed parent or an informed school is an equipped parent and an equipped school. The bottom line is that if the parents are not told they are not going to know. Children at this age do not talk. They do not talk to their parents, they shut down and so we get to hear and that is why it is very important that we inform the parents (Interview BR, 18).

As the findings show, both schools have similar and adequate violence prevention strategies in place. However, the main difference between these two schools regarding their prevention strategies is the extent to which these strategies promote the positive development of their learners. Judd (2006) sees positive youth development as "an approach that focuses on young people's capacities, strengths, and developmental needs – not solely on their problems, risks or health compromising behaviours. It recognises the need to broaden beyond crisis management and problem reduction to strategies that increase young people's connections to positive, supportive relationships and challenging, meaningful experiences" (Judd, 2006:3). The large and diverse learner population, as well as lack of parental support and involvement, act as barriers at School One to implementing prevention strategies that could promote the positive development of their learners. The supportive parents and caring community in which School Two is situated contribute immensely to the successful implementation of the school's discipline strategies because, as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and others suggest, taking a "person-in-context" approach to violence prevention allows for a more complete understanding of the development and prevention of aggression in youth (Reese, Vera, Simon & Ikeda 2000:61).

Theme 4: Family-school collaboration

Parent involvement; learner voice and connectedness, barriers to collaboration and strategies to promote collaboration)

According to Minke (2000), family-school collaborative efforts should be guided by specific co-operatively predetermined outcomes for learners, with mutually established academic and behavioural goals. The school staff members at School One cautioned against parent interference versus parent involvement. They found it difficult to build positive teacher-parent relationships, as there was little parental support. However, they felt strongly that learners behaved better when parents were involved in their children's education. The learners stated that they did want their parents to be involved but they (the learners) needed to decide to what extent. The learners saw their parents' role as one that supported and guided them. They stated that they would be better equipped to withstand peer pressure if their parents had a trusting relationship with them. They believed it was the parents' responsibility to approach them (the learners) and to discuss openly and advise them on how to handle possible difficult issues. One learner explained:

> Well Ma'am in a way they are our parents because if our parents were not able to teach you self-respect or able to teach you on how to handle yourself and money then teenage girls would not be going to all the men and asking for money like you know – like if your parents would provide for you or you tell them mom I have got such a problem. I mean you do not have to turn to older men to solve your problems and if your parents – I mean if your parents are not questioning that then what kind of parent is that (Interview ML5, 59).

Although the parents recognised the importance of working in partnership with the school, they admitted that to a large extent family-school collaboration did not exist at their school. As the majority of the families did not socialise, they did not know one another or even know many of parents of their children's friends. One parent argued:

> I think there should be more of a partnership between parents and the school and the children. If you only have the parent and the child working and not the school you have a problem. If you only have the school and the parent and not the child or vice versa, so I think it is very important that the family and the school work in partnership, which is not always the case and currently not the case in general (Interview MPJ, 16).

On the whole the learners said that they would not report incidents at school, as they did not trust all the staff members. They also had the perception that the school staff members would construe them as being disrespectful if they voiced their opinions. A learner argued:

> I feel like this whole learner/educator thing is viewed very differently, people who are expected to behave in a certain way around teachers whereas we are not like – at the same time we are not being ourselves, we are not allowed to say what we really feel because we will be seen as disrespectful or we are just trespassing or stuff like that Ma'am (Interview ML11, 27).

The school staff members stated that because families lived in a very materialistic world, the parents had to work long hours to give their children financial security. This fact could result in absent parents, and no secure family life as children might be sent to live with their grandparents. These circumstances can lead to a breakdown of discipline structures at home and to the parents expecting the school to provide their children with good discipline. Other factors that the participants believed could act as barriers to family-school collaboration were the family lifestyles, parents' level of education, use of public transport, teacher-parent communication, cultural background, parent-child relationship, inferiority complex, language barrier and parent apathy. To promote family-school collaboration, the school communicates regularly with the parents via smses, emails and weekly newsletters. The schools suggested that more should be done to train parents to become active stakeholders in their children's education, and the learners stated they believed it was the school's responsibility to support the child-parent relationship. At School Two the school staff members believed that open and good communication was essential to any parent-teacher relationship and felt that most parents had established good rapport with the school staff. The learners regarded the role of their parents as being supportive but they (the learners) wanted to decide the extent of this involvement. Parents should trust their children and allow them the independence to act responsibly. One learner explained:

> *I think that it depends on whether or not there is a lot of trust that is involved so your parents need to trust you to know that you will tell them when something is extremely wrong and you cannot handle it (Interview BA2, 39).*

The parents stated that they found the school very supportive of the triangular relationship (learner, parent and teacher). They experienced as excellent the communication between teachers and parents and involving the child. The parents acknowledged that their children wanted more independence but believed that they ought to know that their parents were supportive of them. The school has an open door policy and many parents know one another well because the school is small and many children have been together since primary school. One parent explained:

> *I think for me the school is very much wanting the parents to be part of things that happen to the child, it is not a case of what happens at home is at home, what happens at school is at school, I think they are very pro the whole triangle of the pupil, the parent and the school, and that the triangle does not function effectively if one of those partners are not engaged in that. I think that is the ideal, I think obviously there are a lot of times that part of that triangle is missing whether the child is disengaged or whether the parents are kind of abdicating their roles to an extent for the school to take over, but I think on the whole that is what they are wanting and I find the communication between teachers and parents and then bringing the child in, in my experience has been excellent (Interview BPN, 22).*

The school staff members initiate open communication with the learners and see the positive learner-teacher relationship resulting in creating a sense of family, which builds the learners' self-esteem, creates a spirit of camaraderie and gives the learners a sense of belonging. The parents believed that there was a culture of mutual respect among the learners and there was no form of initiation or belittling of other people. The supervised after-school facilities, as well as the fact that most of the learners were involved in various extramural activities, built camaraderie and good interaction. The participants described the following factors as the major factors that might act as barriers to family-school collaboration: lack of time and the busy lives (of parents), the developmental stage of the adolescent learner, changing family dynamics; work commitment, parent apathy, busy teachers, divorce and the ethos of younger parents (less involved in their children's lives). The school staff members have created various avenues to promote family-school collaboration. These include a specific channel of communication (Grade Tutor to Deputy Head to Head), a Parents' Charter explaining the expectations of the school, a Parent-Teacher Forum, and the Board of Governors. The parents perceived the school staff members as very open and willing to assist the learners and their parents.

As the findings indicate, the mesosystemic linkage between the school and home is pivotal to promote the positive development of the adolescent learner. The school staff members at School Two have built positive and reciprocal relationships, based on a culture of mutual respect and trust with most of the parents and learners. The result is a happy and secure school environment where the parents and learners feel connected to the school. By contrast, at School One the school staff members, learners and parents acknowledged that parental involvement and family-school collaboration were lacking because of the factors mentioned above. According to Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model (1979), the type and quality as well as the presence or absence of the interchange between the adolescent learner and his/her microsystems (such as school and home) will obviously have effects that may either mitigate or exacerbate behavioural or emotional problems. Schools should play an important secondary role in supporting the primary relationship (parent-child) and in creating an environment that welcomes and nurtures families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Interpretation and discussion of main research findings

By definition, the school climate reflects the learners', school staff members' and parents' social, emotional and ethical as well as academic experiences of school life (Durlak & Weissberg, 2005). Recent research reviews indicate that effective risk prevention and positive youth development efforts are associated with a safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climate (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins,

2002; Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik & Elias, 2003). One of the fundamentally important dimensions of a school's climate is relational, i.e. how connected people feel to one another in the school context as well as how connected the school is to the community (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). There is a growing body of research suggesting that school connectedness is a powerful predictor of adolescent health and violence prevention (Karcher, 2002a, 2002b). A school's climate sets the stage for positive learner perceptions of school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001) and also, as the current study has shown, for how welcome and acknowledged the parents feel. Learner and parent connectedness to the school is enhanced by a healthy and safe school environment and a supportive psychosocial school climate. A clean and pleasant physical environment raises expectations of safety and sets the stage for positive, respectful relationships (McNeely, 2003). The psychosocial climate at school is influenced by various factors, such as disciplinary policies, opportunities for meaningful participation and classroom management (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001). The findings of the current study mirror the above empirical evidence. Research indicates that in schools where discipline sets a harsh and retaliatory climate, such as adopting a discipline policy of zero tolerance towards illegal and anti-social learner behaviour, as is the case with School One, learner connectedness is lower (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). A positive school environment, or school climate, is characterised by caring and supportive interpersonal relationships, opportunities to participate in school activities and decision-making, and by shared positive norms, goals and values (Wilson, 2004). In addition, schools with higher rates of participation in extra-curricular activities during and after school tend to have higher levels of school connectedness (Blum, McNeely, Rinehart, 2002), as reflected at School Two. Schools should evaluate their existing physical as well as psychosocial school climate to establish to what extent it promotes or prevents learners and their parents from feeling engaged and connected to the school. Schools are perceived as a natural setting for violence prevention because they provide regular access to children and young people throughout their developmental years. Research has shown that effective violence prevention programmes are aimed at building school capacity by focusing on the three P's – place, people and purpose (Center for the Prevention of School Violence, 2000).

The findings of the current study indicate that at neither of the two school sites have there been incidents of overtly aggressive learner behaviour. This is attributed partially to the existence of adequate physical security measures and clear discipline policies and structures. Especially at School One, much attention is given to making the school environment safe and to preventing weapons and illegal substances from being brought onto school property. To ensure the safety of the large and diverse learner population, School One follows a discipline strategy of zero tolerance. However, research has shown that adopting a zero tolerance policy towards illegal and anti-social learner behaviour has not been proven successful. A "one-size-fits-all" approach is ineffective when dealing with culturally diverse and large learner populations (Curwin & Mendler, 1999:120). From the learners' perspective, adopting a discipline policy of zero tolerance towards illegal and anti-social learner behaviour contributes to their feeling that they do not have the opportunity to voice their opinions, making them feel disconnected from the school. Nor do they feel secure about reporting any knowledge of illegal and anti-social learner behaviour since they do not trust all school staff members to take their concerns or complaints seriously. As the learners acknowledged, they were the ones who actually caused much of the violence at schools and they would like to take responsibility for their actions. However, they stated they needed more opportunities to participate in the school's violence prevention strategies. The current international thinking about school improvement is a shift from the traditional idea where interventions tended to drive change from the outside into schools; instead, we ought to start by getting close to the learners first (Mapp, 2004; Flutter, 2007). Contrary to general belief, the current study's findings suggest that adolescent learners do want their parents to be involved in their lives and support their education. However, these young people also want to decide to what extent their parents should be involved. Adolescents are at a developmental stage where they need to find their own identity (Erikson, 1968) but they also need to know that their parents are willing to support and guide them. Therefore, fostering a culture of social trust is important to building family and community involvement with schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Learners are the people

who matter most in schools, and they have unique knowledge of what is going on at school and how to effectively address the problems and issues related to learner behaviour and school safety.

At School One, serving a very culturally diverse learner population, the school staff members feel that many parents do not instil good discipline at home as they regard disciplining their children as the sole responsibility of the school. Guerra and Knox (2008) suggest that culture should be viewed as a key moderator of intervention effectiveness. They define culture as a collection of social norms, beliefs and values that are learned over time and that provide both a worldview and a way of living (Guerra & Knox, 2008:311). Schools should incorporate cultural competence in their prevention strategies by addressing issues of culture as part of the intervention so that culture becomes an asset to be enhanced (Guerra & Knox, 2008). This is highly relevant for many schools in South Africa where the schools accommodate very culturally diverse families such as those at School One. School staff members should assess the various norms and values these different cultures have regarding appropriate behaviour and decide how to address these issues in a culturally sensitive way if they want the learners and their parents to support the school's violence prevention strategies. It is essential that the learners and parents should be involved in the design and implementation of the various prevention strategies so that they will be motivated to take ownership of these strategies and to support the school's efforts. The success of the prevention strategies at School Two is attributed mainly to the positive, trusting and supportive relationships existing among all the stakeholders. Other factors contributing to this success at School Two are its discipline policies that focus on the development of the learners' self-discipline and having various avenues for the learners and parents to participate and voice their opinions regarding acceptable learner behaviour. If schools are to develop prevention strategies that are developmentally focused and culturally appropriate, they ought to acknowledge and accommodate the specific needs and beliefs of their learners and families. Promoting better learner and family support and participation would provide them with additional knowledge, skills and resources, which should result in more effective violence prevention strategies. Schools are social places and learning is a social process where learners learn in collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers and with the support of their families (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2007). Schools should become the hub of all efforts to create safe and caring communities. School management and principals are in a position to head and implement school-system change. If the system of education, and specifically schools, is to be successful in the schools' violence prevention strategies, every aspect of the system must function together with all the other parts. If schools are to design and implement strategies that would successfully address and prevent aggressive or violent learner behaviour, they should give young people and their families the opportunity to be active, productive and collaborative partners in promoting the positive and successful development of these young people. School management has to evaluate its school's current climate and the existing policies and strategies as these relate to promoting collaborative family-school partnerships. They have to create the leadership and support systems that will enhance family-school collaboration in their violence prevention efforts. School staff members and educators should create welcoming school climates that foster family-school relationships which surpass context, culture and language (Ferguson, 2008). A safe and caring school needs not only effective physical security measures but also a psychosocial school climate that promotes a feeling of connectedness between the school and the families. Educators should evaluate their disciplinary policies, existing opportunities for meaningful learner and family participation and effective classroom management to create a supportive psychosocial school climate. Young people need to feel connected to their two most important social contexts, namely their homes and the school, by means of reciprocal and supportive relationships between their parents and the school staff members. As the participants of the current study stated, the commitment and participation of the learners and their families were crucial if schools wanted to address school-based learner violence effectively.

Conclusion and recommendations

As the findings of the current study and of numerous others (see Leoschut & Burton, 2006; Steyn, Badenhorst & Kamper, 2010) indicate, violence has become the norm in many South African adolescent learners' homes and communities. Schools bring together several interacting and equally important groups, namely the school

staff members, learners and their families, which together can address the problem of adolescent violence more effectively and thus contribute to breaking the cycle of violence. Each of these groups has a unique perspective on what is happening at school and in their communities, as well as what should be done to create safe and caring schools. Furthermore, the similarities and differences between these perspectives may add important insights into strategies for promoting the effective family-school collaborative partnerships that seem to be essential to preventing school-based learner violence (Kgobe & Mbokazi, 2008; Steyn, Badenhorst & Kamper, 2010). Creating opportunities for the learners and their families to participate collaboratively in creating safe and caring schools, and for school staff members to reach out to these families and communities, should result in comprehensive, ongoing and systematic approaches to ensure the healthy, safe and positive development of these young people and their families.

The findings and recommendations of the current study, situated in the qualitative paradigm, may not necessarily apply to schools in general. The diverse nature of the type and levels of school-based learner violence makes it impossible to assume that the contexts or participants in the current study are representative of all urban secondary schools. Furthermore, the nature of the family-school collaborative relationships at the two selected schools may not be typical of all the types and levels of existing practices at other urban secondary schools. Therefore, policy makers, school staff members, families and learners should evaluate for themselves the virtues of these findings and recommendations, based on their own school and family contexts. However, these findings, supported by the review of existing empirical evidence (see Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Kgobe & Mbokazi, 2008) hold important implications for future research into collaborative violence prevention policies, programmes and strategies. Based on the conclusions drawn from the analysis and synthesis of the study findings as these relate to the research question, we make the following recommendation for future research in the field of school violence prevention. Research should be conducted on school ecology and connectedness. Connectedness is a powerful predictor of violence prevention (e.g. Karcher 2002a, 2002b) and is a protective factor in risky sexual, violent and drug-use behaviour (e.g. Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Londzak & Hawkins, 2002). More research is needed to identify the factors that could promote school connectedness and how the school climate affects the extent to which school staff members, learners and families feel connected to one another. The findings of these studies could contribute to identifying research-based guidelines for promoting school connectedness. Promoting school connectedness should result in creating safe, supportive, responsive and participatory school climates conducive to collaborative family-school violence prevention efforts.

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