

## **STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this article, the authors gauge the perceptions of student teachers on violence in primary schools and their immediate communities. Learners' exposure to mounting levels of violence and crime in South Africa in general, but more specifically in their homes and communities, affects their behaviour adversely. The data collection took the form of a written submission of the discussion of semi-structured reflective questions in a post-internship oral reflection in student teachers' internship school groups after an approximately three month long internship period in Pretoria schools. Student teachers believe that school violence impacts on learners and teachers to a large extent, often damaging the trust relationship between them. In addition, the uncertainty of teachers in dealing with incidents of violence sometimes creates the impression that they are uncaring. Students contend that measures such as workshops for all role players, as well as stricter discipline, could alleviate the problem of violence in schools and communities. The place to begin to stem the burgeoning tide of violence in society at large, lies with government.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the public Human Rights Commission (HRC) hearings on school-based violence in Cape Town in September 2006, it became apparent that "substantial numbers of learners" were exposed to violence in schools and that in certain communities, violence had "become the norm with children playing macabre playground games such as 'Stab me, Stab me' or 'Rape me, Rape me' " (Kollapen, 2006, p. 2). The extent of violence in schools is further evidenced by the reportage in the South African (SA) media almost daily, of isolated incidents of extreme violence. Recent examples include the assault on a learner and the subsequent arrest of the two perpetrators (fellow-learners) at a KwaZulu-Natal school on 6 May 2010 (Magwaza, 2010) and the attack on a thirteen year old learner by ten bullies in a Pretoria primary school cloakroom (Rademeyer, 2010) (also see Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2009).

The media reportage and the experiences described during the HRC hearings are supported by the findings of the largest South African survey on school violence to date, the National Schools Violence Study (NSVS), undertaken by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) (Burton, 2008). Included in the 120 primary schools surveyed were 139 principals, 277 teachers and 6,787 learners. The extent of violence with regards to primary school learners in the schools surveyed is indicated as follows:

- 10.8% were threatened with violence;
- 7.5% were assaulted;
- 3.19% were robbed;
- 1.4% experienced some form of sexual violence; and
- 12% were shouted at or made to feel ashamed (Burton, 2008).

Clearly, the current situation in schools in South Africa is untenable. In accordance with education as a universal human right, “free from harassment” (McGuckin & Lewis, 2008, p. 9), as underpinned in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and the right to basic education as described in Section 29(1)(a) of the Constitution of South Africa (Lake & Pendlebury, 2008/2009; also see Nesor, 2005), it is crucially important to address the situation of not only violence in our schools, but also spiralling violence levels in the country at large, because the increasing levels of violence in society have a direct impact on levels of violence in schools (Burton, 2008; De Wet, 2005, 2007; Kollapen, 2006; Prinsloo & Nesor, 2007). The rate of violence in primary schools in SA is 75 learners per 1,000, and 5 per 1,000 in the United States (Burton, 2008).

Determining the perceptions of as many role players in the school system as possible in an attempt to understand the situation better and to facilitate the creation of safe schools seems like a logical first step in any endeavour to reduce violence levels that are clearly out of control, irrespective of the criteria used to assess the situation. This article, which is a follow-up on an article published in *Acta Criminologica* in 2009 (Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2009), reports on an investigation into the perceptions of final year student teachers at the University of Pretoria (UP) of the extent and impact of violence (including bullying), in schools and society at large, with a view to offering education departments guidelines on dealing with school-violence challenges.

## **RATIONALE**

We initially became interested in the issue of violence in schools during our early teaching careers in secondary schools and more recently at tertiary level through our involvement with teacher education students who are placed in both secondary and primary schools for teaching practice purposes. We consider the research worthwhile, due to the fact that we have a) discovered through our literature overview a global lack of comprehensive data on levels of violence in schools in developing countries, b) became aware of the escalation in various types of school violence, especially in South Africa, although the school is generally recognised as the primary socialisation instrument (Burton, 2008; Lawrence in Nesor, 2005; Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007), c) realized that bullying begins as early as the pre-primary school years, while levels appear to peak during the primary school years and to decline during the secondary school years (Smit, 2003; also see Juvonen, et al.; Salmivalli; Seals & Young, and Selekman & Vessey in Greeff & Grobler, 2008; Ross in Bauman, 2008).

It is therefore logical and, in fact, imperative to describe and address the bullying phenomenon specifically in primary schools, firstly because we believe that successful intervention could potentially reduce bullying in both primary and secondary schools and even help prevent “negative mental health and social outcomes

that may [otherwise] persist into adulthood” amongst bullies and victims (Bauer, Lozano, & Rivara, 2007, p. 266).

## **OVERVIEW**

### ***Towards a definition of school violence***

Olweus (in Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, De Bettencourt & Lemme, 2006), widely regarded as the pioneer in research on bullying, emphasises that bullying constitutes repeated (aggressive) negative actions over time, and acknowledges that under certain conditions, single instances of “serious harassment” can be regarded as bullying. Burton’s (2008, p. 3) broad view of school violence “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 Kollapen, 2006; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009).

The term *violence* will be used in this article to refer to all forms of physical and emotional abuse, including bullying. In some instances the word “bullying”, when used in quotations from or in direct reference to sources consulted, could refer to more specific manifestations of violence.

### ***An international perspective***

Globally, extensive research has been conducted on the twin topics of violence and bullying. Furthermore, a large number of countries (notably in the Americas, Europe, Australasia and Africa) have instituted measures for curbing violence to create safer schools. In 2003, the United States Department of Health and Human Services for instance developed a “Stop bullying now” website (Srabstein, Berkman & Pyntikova, 2008), and in 2004, after the killing of his grandparents and seven learners by a 16 year old Red Lake, Minnesota learner, the United States Congress was requested by the National Association of School Resource Officers “to enact a homeland security measure for schools and to fund school safety” (Bucher & Manning, 2005, p. 55). In Scandinavia, the suicide of three adolescent boys resulting from purportedly severe bullying by peers led to a national campaign in which 140,000 students and 715 schools participated (Olweus in Greeff & Grobler, 2008). This pioneering study, conducted in Norway during the 1980s, focused attention on school violence globally and led to numerous studies on and measures against school violence in developed countries. In Switzerland (Klingeman cited in Kuntsche & Klingeman, 2004, p. 382), a third of adolescent girls are victims and perpetrators of non-physical violence, while the more than one in ten boys who are victims of physical violence are themselves also physically violent (Kuntsche & Klingeman, 2004). The high levels of violence in Dutch primary and secondary schools gave rise to a successful five-year (1995-2000) national government anti-violence campaign in The Netherlands (Mooij, 2005). In England, schools are legally required to enforce an anti-bullying policy as proscribed in numerous policy documents, like the Education and Inspections Act (2006), and are supported by government-funded anti-bullying initiatives like the *Don’t suffer in silence* (1994; 2002) packs. Research has revealed that in 2002, at least 91% of schools in England applied anti-bullying policies separately, or as part of a wider behaviour or discipline policy (Smith, Smith, Osborn & Samara, 2008). In 2003 in New Zealand, a study by Coggan, Bennett, Hooper and Dickinson identified a link between the experience of chronic bullying and high levels of mental stress among learners aged between 9 and 13, of whom “one in five ... had attempted to harm

themselves deliberately and one in nine reported attempting to end their own lives” (cited in MacDonald & Swart, 2004, p. 34). Anti-violence initiatives have been launched in Australia and Canada (Srabstein et al., 2008), Italy (Gini, 2004) and Spain (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen & Voeten, 2005), and anti-bullying legislation has been promulgated in, amongst others, Scotland, Wales and Ireland (McGuckin & Lewis, 2008; also see O’Moore, 2000). A special report on bullying in eight African countries (Kenya, Morocco, Namibia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe) indicates that bullying should not be regarded as part of ‘normal’ childhood development, and that in all eight countries surveyed, it is associated with an increased likelihood of involvement in physical fighting and multiple adverse health behaviours such as smoking, substance abuse, risky sexual behaviour and suicide ideation (Brown, Riley, Butchar & Kann, 2008). In her report on prospects for peace on the African continent, which has for over forty years been characterised by conflict and general insecurity, Tchombe (2006, p. 8) highlights the importance of education as the “key solution” to teaching values “such as empathy, altruism, tolerance and group membership” and to addressing the “roles of competition and cooperation along with efforts to regulate aggression” to promote bullying resilience, citizenship and peace education.

## **A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE ON VIOLENCE IN SOCIETY AND SCHOOLS**

### ***Violence in schools, communities and society***

Numerous authors have highlighted the links between violence in society and in schools. Various authors also relate the prevailing, unacceptably high levels of violence in South African schools to the lingering legacy of apartheid. According to Lockhat and Van Niekerk (2000, p. 295), for instance, one of the “most crippling aspects” of the violence experienced in the apartheid state during the 1980s, when learners turned schools into “sites of violence and conflict”, is that “violence has come to be expected and may even have become normalised” in South African society. Such effects of past violence are currently evident in the “severely compromised ... atmosphere where violence reigns” (Kollapen, 2006, p. 2).

Among the number of “pervasive examples that model elements of bullying” that children emulate through the powerful process of social learning, Bauman (2008) includes bullying and intimidation by adults (including teachers); racism; discrimination against minority groups; and the belief that victims deserve to be bullied (Vernberg & Gamm in Bauman, 2008). Media violence is blamed by Derksen and Strasburger (in Lam & Liu, 2007) for the distorted information children receive on gender, violence and different societal roles. Daniels (2007) surmises that children exercise their rights and their freedom of expression through violence because they have not been taught by their parents to respect the rights of others and because parents say ‘yes’ too easily. Like Daniels, who wants the problem tackled on a “day-to-day basis” to prevent “quite a backlash 20 years down the line” (2007, p. 15), Bloch calls on society to “rally around” because change “will never come only from above” (2008, p. 6). The prevalence of violence in South Africa could, according to Senosi (in Maree, 2005) be attributed to high unemployment levels, the gap between the wealthy and the poor, the patriarchal system and easy access to firearms. The easy access to firearms and other weapons is underscored by the 11.3% of primary school learners surveyed in the NSVS who reported that guns were easily obtainable in their

neighbourhood, while 12.8% said the same in regard to knives (Burton, 2008). Yet, violence encompasses much more than the use of knives and fire-arms; it also comprises more subtle actions such as name calling, teasing, ridicule, and racial, ethnic and cultural slurs (Bucher & Manning, 2005).

Since almost a quarter of primary school children surveyed reported that they do not feel safe in their communities due to high levels of violence, interventions to reduce violence levels should seemingly be targeted at learners' communities, rather than schools (Burton, 2008). Although primary and secondary socialisation are usually provided by the family and school and peer groups respectively (Neser, 2005), Lawrence (in Neser, 2005, p. 61), regards the school as the "basic conduit" or "primary instrument of socialisation" through which both community and adult influences are channelled. Schools should therefore be devoid of violence, which is counter-productive and hampers the school's educational and social objectives (Prinsloo & Neser, 2007). In this regard, Lubbe (in Prinsloo & Neser, 2007, p. 328) advocates an "integrated, holistic and multi-disciplinary community approach to school violence".

### ***The effect of violence on learners***

As a result of their exposure to extremely high (and mounting) levels of violence and crime, not only in the country generally, but more specifically in their homes, many South African learners display "aggressive and victimizing behaviour in schools" (Greeff & Grobler, 2008, p. 139). In Umbumbulu near Durban, learners and members of the local population killed an alleged gang member after teachers and learners from three schools in the area were held up and two of the schools were burgled and vandalised. Taxi drivers now drop teachers off closer to school and learners walk to school in groups to ensure safety (Ndlovu, 2010). Moreover, recent newspaper reports underscore the harmful effects of school violence on teachers and learners; for example, a grade 7 learner who shot his mathematics teacher for punishing him after he had stolen a mathematics set from a fellow learner, was acquitted by the Pretoria Juvenile Court after being found not guilty (Otto, 2010). Although numerous authors have lately begun to focus on learners as perpetrators of school violence (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006; Frisé, Jonsson & Persson, 2007; Garandean & Cillelssen, 2006; Townsend, Flisher, Chikobvu, Lombard & King, 2008), a much greater volume of work has been published on victim status (Smith, 2004).

The effects of school violence on learners include academic problems (Bauman, 2008), "an increased likelihood of involvement in physical fighting" (Brown et al., 2008, p. 289); somatic symptoms like stomach ache or headache; and mental health concerns, such as "anxiety, loneliness and low self-esteem, which often lead to self-destructive behaviour like suicidal ideation" (Holt, Finkelhor & Kantor in Swart & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 406; San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). This view is underscored by incidents such as the recent attempted suicide by a 10 year old Alberton boy who tried to commit suicide after having been bullied repeatedly at school (Groenewald, 2010).

According to Burton, the reporting of incidents of violence to school authorities by learners could be a predictor of delinquency levels and an indication of the levels of trust between learners and teachers in a school. In South Africa, reporting levels are low, but most victims confide in teachers (Burton, 2008). Elsewhere, up to 50% of

victims do not tell adults, including teachers, that they are bullied (Whitney & Smith in Oliver & Candappa, 2007) and many victims surveyed felt that “telling a teacher ran a higher risk of the bullying getting worse, compared with telling other adults or friends” (Hunter, Boyle & Warden, 2004, p. 388; Oliver & Candappa, 2007, p. 74; Williams & Cornell, 2006). “Telling” others about school violence incidents is regarded by some as a coping behaviour (Lazarus in Hunter, et al., 2004) and it therefore seems logical that all role players would benefit if adults working in schools (teaching and non-teaching staff) could be empowered to deal with school violence (McGuckin & Lewis, 2008), since in most schools, only teachers receive training and guidance in this regard.

### ***The effect of violence on teachers***

Besides the *physical* dangers posed by assault, theft or vandalism, *psychological* and *social* side effects that cause anxiety and fear need to be addressed (Prinsloo & Nesor, 2007). Psychologists indicate that growing numbers of teachers suffer from “psycho-social stress and related conditions” due to “the hostile and insecure environment in schools”, and in a Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) survey, most teachers revealed that they would leave the profession if they could (cited by Kollapen, 2006, p. 2). However, very few authors (including De Wet, 2007; Ellis & Shute, 2007; O’Moore, 2000; Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2009) have written about teachers as victims, perpetrators, witnesses and combatants of violence in schools.

Although teachers in South Africa are often approached for assistance by victims, they mostly feel unable to take action against perpetrators. This is partially due to the abolition of corporal punishment in all schools since 1997 through the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Teachers under too much stress, 2007). School principals, in a meeting with South African President Jacob Zuma, called for the reinstatement of corporal punishment to restore order in schools (Liebenberg & Kruger, 2009), asking for it to be meted out “moderately ... under supervision of the school principal and an available member of the governing body” (Matyu, 2007, p. 8). Van der Westhuizen & Maree (2009, p. 58) are “vehemently opposed to this inhumane and degrading form of discipline, which has no place in post-modern society”.

As mentioned earlier, the implementation of discipline and anti-violence policies is legislated in some countries. Researchers have found that it is advisable to allow learners to assist with the formulation of behavioural rules and that the rules should be anchored in the school curriculum (Mooij, 2005; also see Smith, Anandiou & Cowie in Smith et al., 2008). Anti-bullying policy should also, once established, be communicated to all stakeholders in the school community (Smith et al., 2008). In South Africa, the government has acknowledged that violence is a problem in schools and the NSVS findings, according to Burton, “underscore the important symbiotic relationship” between learners’ schools, homes and communities; thus growing international experience could be used to “inform local priorities” (2008, pp. 75, 84).

### **AIM OF THE RESEARCH**

The purpose of this research is to gauge the perceptions of teacher education students at the University of Pretoria, of violence in primary schools and their immediate communities.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The article reports on the perceptions of final year teacher education students at the University of Pretoria of the extent and impact of violence in schools and their immediate communities.

The research questions are:

- What are teacher education students' perceptions of the extent and impact of violence in primary schools in the Pretoria region?
- How do teacher education students, teachers and learners deal with violence in primary schools?
- How can the government and schools address violence in primary schools?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participants and context*

During 2008, the participants, 365 final year Bachelor of Education (BEd) teacher education students, were required to **discuss** the questions that would be used in 2009 in the teacher interviews (in secondary schools), in their internship school groups. Student leaders of the internship school groups **wrote down** their groups' views in regard to each question. The oral and written reflections of the teacher education students who had been placed at 24 primary schools, were used for this research.

The sample is, in a sense, purposive, since students sought placement in schools from various socio-economic strata in different parts of the city, i.e. inner city, middle class and upper middle class suburban schools. Teacher education students (hereinafter referred to as students) responded to a semi-structured reflective questionnaire as part of their post-internship reflection.

### *Data collection*

The qualitative data is comprised of students' group reflections (oral and written) on the semi-structured reflective questions in the post-internship reflection guideline. After the students' written group reflections had been typed, the most common themes per semi-structured reflective question were uncovered.

### *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 (Creswell, 2003, 2007; Durrheim, 1999) in nature.

Qualitative data sources<sup>1</sup> were constituted by the oral and written group reflections of the students presented in written form by the student leader of each school group.

For the purpose of *data analysis*, the documented data were organised, and categories, themes and patterns identified. The data were evaluated and categorised (Creswell, 2007) and, finally, the identified categories were compared with the extant literature on violence in schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to space constraints, we do not report on or integrate all the data into the results.

***Ensuring the trustworthiness of the inquiry***

Trustworthiness was ensured in the study by using various strategies during the data collection and analysis (See Table 1).

*Table 1*

Strategies to increase and enhance trustworthiness during data collection and analysis

<b>Credibility</b>	<b>Triangulation</b> – in regard to the diverging and converging of evidence, student teachers' oral discussions in their internship school groups were followed up by written responses to the semi-structured reflective questions (recorded by the student leader of each group) (Golafshani, 2003; Stake, 2005). Prolonged engagement in the field – student observations in the field were carried out over a period of three calendar months, spanning an internship period. <b>Crystallisation</b> <sup>2</sup> – 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.
<b>Dependability</b>	All data were coded independently by an external coder in order to ensure that the identified themes were an accurate representation of the data. <i>Verbatim</i> accounts were produced, as student leaders wrote down the exact responses decided upon by their internship group members after they had discussed the semi-structured reflective questions in the same groups (low inference descriptor).
<b>Confirmability</b>	The data obtained, the methods used and the decisions made during the project were thoroughly documented.
<b>Transferability</b>	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 potential applicability of the findings to other known settings.

(Compiled from Creswell, 2003, pp. 196-197; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, pp. 407-409)

***Limitations***

The limited scope of the study, the use of non-standardised reflective questionnaires, the small number of school groups and the limited location (Pretoria), as well as the possibility that other researchers could interpret the results differently, could be regarded as limitations. The generalisation of results would require a more comprehensive study.

***Ethical aspects***

The ethical clearance for the use of teaching practice (internship) data, such as reflections, allows for the use of the student reflections on school violence, which constituted part of a more general reflection on their internship experiences. Students were informed of the way in which their internship group reflections could be used and were assured of anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> We are aware that many researchers believe that triangulation and crystallisation should not be referred to in one study. In following researchers such as Bar-On (2007), Elias (2007) and Jansen (2007), we do, however, use both strategies in this study.

## **FINDINGS**

The framework for reporting the findings that were derived from the emergent themes is constituted by the questions in the semi-structured reflective questionnaire that students were requested to discuss and answer in their school internship groups.

*Table 2*

Interview questions and major themes derived from students' replies to questions

<b>1. What is the extent of violence in your school and the school community?</b>	
a.	Broad range: from little to extreme violence observed in schools.
b.	Nature of violence is broad, too:
i.	"innocent", e.g. pushing;
ii.	moderate, e.g. kicking; and
iii.	serious, e.g. throwing dangerous objects.
<b>2. How do you feel about the impact of violence on teachers and learners?</b>	
a.	Gives rise to tension and fear among teachers.
b.	Affects learners negatively.
c.	Learners become tense and fearful at school.
d.	Affects the relationship of trust between teachers and learners.
<b>3. How does your school deal with challenges regarding violence?</b>	
a.	Implements discipline policies and codes of conduct.
b.	Reverts to security measures.
c.	Informs parents of incidents.
<b>4. How do you and the learners deal with violence?</b>	
a.	Implement disciplinary system.
b.	Discuss incidents of violence with one another.
<b>5. How do you feel about the future of the country and the impact of violence?</b>	
a.	Deep concern about the future.
b.	Desperate need for something to be done about violence.
c.	Necessary to institute stricter measures to decrease violence.
<b>6. In your opinion, what should be done by government and the schools to address the problem of violence?</b>	
a.	In-service training, e.g. conduct awareness workshops.
b.	Re-institute corporal punishment.
c.	Focus on teachers' rights.
d.	Return teachers' authority.
<b>7. Do you think teachers are equipped to deal with school violence?</b>	
a.	Teachers are poorly trained and not equipped to deal with violence.
b.	Teacher education curricula should include module/s on dealing with violence.
<b>8. Would you like to add anything else?</b>	
a.	Urgent need to end violence.
b.	Violence eradication should begin at home.
c.	Collaboration between various stakeholders (e.g. teachers, parents, learners, police and psychologists) is important.

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

The majority of students indicated that they observed little or no physical violence in the schools during the internship period, while students at three schools observed learners throwing objects (in two cases bricks), at one another: "26 boys who threw bricks at one another ..."; "Learners threw bricks that were on the school grounds at

one another”; and “Learners attacked one another and threw blocks at one another”. Some students reported observing high levels of violence: “There was a surprising amount of violence for the small school that it was. Some of the events that occurred were also of a very severe/serious nature”. A number of students reported that learners (mainly older boys) bring dangerous objects, including knives, to school. Students indicated that aggression among large numbers of learners who lose their temper invariably, leads to incidents of violence: “There was constant fighting, hitting and kicking by the learners. They were not fearful of throwing dangerous objects at one another”. They ascribe this tendency toward aggression to violence experienced in learners’ homes and in the community, as well as to learners’ exposure to violence in magazines and on television: “There was a lot of violence in the form of bullying – pushing, kicking, hitting. Violence clearly came from the homes. Violent “WWE” magazines and violent sports like rugby also inspired violent behaviour”. In the lower grades, name-calling (especially among girls), verbal bullying and intimidation are rife: “The closest to violence is a high level of intimidation in classes, especially regarding smaller [younger] learners”.

*How do you feel about the impact of violence on teachers and learners?*

Almost all the students found that levels of violence in their schools give rise to fear and tension among both teachers and learners, and some teachers “are more in danger now and feel afraid to go and teach”. In some cases, teachers are negative and uncertain of how to act because: “you may not touch the children”. A number of students believe that the violence phenomenon in schools damages the trust relationship between teachers and learners: “The learners control the teachers because they are afraid of violent learners”; “The teachers were [are] not very responsive to the violent acts. This negatively impacts the learners as it portrays an image of uncaring teachers”. On the other hand, teachers have limited powers to assist learners, especially when they are exposed to violence in their own homes, e.g. “... we as teachers must create a safe learning environment and it is difficult with learners with such a [violent] background”. Learners exposed to violence in schools are affected in many respects: “... it affects their performance negatively. They become withdrawn, afraid to come to school and passive”; “... affects concentration, self-esteem and overall potential”.

*How does your school deal with challenges regarding violence?*

The majority of primary schools surveyed apply strict discipline policies or codes of conduct and/or tight security measures to serve as a deterrent to misbehaviour and violence and to promote mutual respect among teachers and learners: “The school teaches the learners to treat each other with respect and violence towards each other is no option. The school has a policy in place for this type of thing”; yet some schools appear to “turn a blind eye”. Many schools notify parents as soon as their child is involved in an incident and a small number of schools make use of a psychologist or liaise with the South African Police Services (SAPS): “No violence is tolerated in the school, if violence occurs the police and the parents are contacted immediately”; “The school has a psychologist and outside help ... if the child cannot be assisted or there is no improvement, the child is removed from the violent environment”.

*How do you and the learners deal with violence?*

Answers to this section are linked to those for question two and three and most students indicated here that the school's discipline policy was immediately implemented when necessary. An additional theme that was identified in almost a quarter of the reflections entails the discussion of incidents of school violence during school time: "Teachers no longer have much authority. They speak to the learners and try to calm the situation"; "[We] discuss it, but try to limit the number of references to violence"; "By discussing what happened and explaining and understanding the reason for it and learning through these experiences to minimize chances of it happening again". At one school the students reported an incident to a higher authority and: "The learners retaliated". One group of students indicated that teachers could incorporate incidents into real-life lessons and allow learners to discuss ways of dealing with the violence.

*How do you feel about the future of the country and the impact of violence?*

Students are adamant that stricter measures need to be employed to fight violence in learners' homes and in the country in general: "Discipline starts at home, so without discipline there is no future"; "We feel it is up to the parents to implement discipline at home"; "Teach respect of self and others".

Some students note the extremely adverse effects of the spiralling levels of violence in the country on schools where learners "are not sheltered enough, and as a result they are forced to grow up too quickly without the necessary emotional maturity". A number of student groups expressed the fear that South African schools will become like some schools in "England and parts of America". Of the 24 group reflections, nine groups indicated that they felt particularly negative about the future of the country and the impact of violence, describing their attitudes as "uncertain", "our hands are tied", "no hope", "despondent" "worse and worse". Only three student groups indicated that a positive attitude would assist in overcoming the violence epidemic in the country: "We feel we need to remain positive"; "Positive, we must change our attitude and try to improve it". In addition, some students note that teachers have no control and there is no protection for them. Only one group has called for the return of corporal punishment: "We feel that corporal punishment, not abuse, should be brought back so that a teacher can have authority and discipline can be applied in the school".

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

Thirteen student groups advocate the use of seminars and similar training sessions for teachers, parents and learners by the government and schools to deal with school violence. One group suggests "sentencing" parents with undisciplined children to community service and a number believe that a stronger bond between schools and the SAPS could be highly beneficial. Three student groups recommend harsher punishment for transgressors, e.g.: "The government should improve on the systems. They should implement punishment that will make the people afraid to act violently"; schools should "Discuss it and punish any violence-related situations severely", with one group advocating the age of maturity to be lowered to 16. Numerous students

insist that teachers be granted the “authority” to deal with school violence: “The government should grant teachers authority”; “Focus more on teachers’ rights and safety”.

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

Of the 24 primary school student groups, 21 indicated that teachers are not equipped to deal with school violence, e.g.; “We do not know what we should do if something violent happens at the school. The department should have workshops and the co-operation of police and psychologists”; “No, we are taught to discipline learners, not deal with violence”. Two student groups point out that student teachers are not afforded sufficient authority during the internship period to deal effectively with school violence: “Student teachers need to be regarded as authoritarian [sic] and learners need to respect their student teachers’ place in the school”; “No, students may not say or do anything to children. Students should have more power and can learn various ways of dealing with it”. Some students also point out that teachers need to teach, rather than deal with violence in situations where learners view teachers as helpless. In addition, many students feel that even teachers already in the system are unable to deal with violence and that a module on dealing with violence should be included in teacher education curricula.

*Would you like to add anything else?*

The majority of student groups left the section blank. Some used the invitation to add anything (on violence in schools) as an opportunity to ask questions about the internship requirements, e.g. the number of reflections. Only two student groups focused on school violence, indicating that it should be stopped and that teachers should learn how to deal with individual learners.

## **DISCUSSION**

In summary, there was no indication that the forms or manifestations of violence differed between inner city and suburban schools. Learners generally seem prone to losing their temper easily and reacting violently in conflict situations. Boys in the higher grades bring weapons (mainly knives) to school, while the lower grades are characterised by intimidation and verbal bullying. School violence impacts on learners and teachers to a large extent, often damaging the trust relationship between them. Teachers’ uncertainty of how to deal with violence at school sometimes creates the impression that they are uncaring. A high level of parent involvement, strict discipline policies and security measures in most primary schools surveyed ensure that incidents of violence are addressed as soon as they occur, while a small number of schools make use of psychological services and call on the SAPS for assistance when necessary. Despite many negative attitudes, students appear to believe that stricter measures in the country and schools in general will alleviate the problem of violence in schools and communities, which permeates our “daily life”, and ensure a more positive future. Students are of the general opinion that government needs to take drastic measures to reduce the incidence of violence in the country and in schools. These include workshops at schools for all role players to ensure that they all know what is expected of them. Schools are advised to reinstate teacher authority and to work more closely with the SAPS, and even to reinstate corporal punishment.

We concur with the view that a safe school “means more than eliminating knifings, fights and shootings. Violence is also subtle things such as name calling; fear of being ridiculed; teasing; offensive touching; racial, ethnic, cultural or sexual slurs; and bullying” (Hernandez & Seem in Bucher & Manning, 2005, p. 56). Viewed against the background of statistics from the NSVS (Burton, 2008), the negative, almost daily, media reportage, and recent local research (e.g. De Wet, 2007; Greeff & Grobler, 2008; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009; and Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2009), Burton’s call for targeted interventions on local, provincial and national level to achieve the goal of “schools that are violence-free, healthy and safe environs for learners and educators” (2008, pp. 83-84) needs to be answered.

In regard to the extent of violence in primary schools, our study yielded results similar to those from other studies. Student teachers’ perceptions of different types of violence perpetrated by boys as being more physical, often characterised by using weapons, and perceptions of girls as less physical (girls in our study seemed to show a tendency towards reverting to verbal bullying and intimidation), in primary schools, are commensurate with other researchers’ findings (Burton, 2008; Greeff and Grobler, 2008; Smit, 2003). In addition, the influence of learners’ homes and communities on violent behaviour is also well-described in the literature: Bauman for example confirms that children “reflect the values and behaviour they see in their homes, on television, in video games, and in the behaviour of famous personalities and world leaders” (2008, p. 368).

The literature surveyed for this research revealed examples of the effects of bullying on teachers, but focused mainly on the effects on teachers of bullying and bullied children (e.g. De Wet, 2005; De Wet, 2007; Ellis and Shute, 2007; San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). South African research, however, that confirms student teachers’ perceptions of “educator-targeted bullying (ETB) [which] is rife in most of the schools that the researchers visited” (De Wet & Jacobs, 2006, p. 54), supports perceptions described by the student teachers surveyed here. Teachers’ reluctance to respond to acts of violence is linked by student teachers in our study to their limited power to intervene. Our study therefore confirms the findings of Williams and Cornell, who state that many learners do not seek assistance from teachers because they “do not believe teachers are willing and able to help them” (2006, p. 38). This aspect is linked to the reporting of bullying to teachers, which, according to Burton (2008), is much higher in primary than in secondary schools. This finding suggests a degree of learner-trust in school authorities in the primary school. International literature, however, indicates that whether telling a teacher is effective, will depend on the teacher’s response (Nicolaidis, Toda & Smith, 2002; also see Maree, 2005; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007).

Student teachers believe that ways in which learners deal with violence are determined largely by the discipline policies and codes of conduct discussed here. This finding correlates positively with the general trend world-wide of applying a whole-school approach, and even anti-bullying legislation (in Scotland, Wales, Ireland and elsewhere), to deal with bullying in schools (Salmivalli et al., 2005; also see McGuckin & Lewis, 2008; O’Moore, 2000; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009). Also in line with student teachers’ perceptions based on their internship in schools, researchers mention the value of parental involvement in schools (Bauer et al., 2007;

Leff in Swart & Bredekamp, 2009; Selekman & Vessey in De Wet, 2007), while some also focus on the positive role the police can fulfil in combating bullying (De Wet, 2007).

In addition, students' suggestion that teachers could incorporate incidents into real-life lessons is, to an extent, supported in the literature. Cowie and Olafsson (in Swart & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 420) suggest teaching learners "basic skills of active listening, empathy, problem-solving and supportiveness", specifically in regard to peer support. Swart and Bredekamp (2009, p. 420) recommend that such skills be "modelled and required across the curriculum", but that they be emphasised particularly in the life orientation learning area so as to instil the school's values in learners (also see Greeff & Grobler, 2008; Prinsloo & Naser, 2007; MacDonald & Swart, 2004).

The findings regarding the impact of violence and the future of the country (South Africa) on the students' feelings were mainly negative, and a number of student teachers (one group only), advocated the return of corporal punishment. Although we were unable to locate mention of corporal punishment in international sources used for this research, it is still under discussion among student teachers and others in South Africa (Maree, 2005; Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2009).

Student teachers' request for a component on dealing with bullying in teacher education curricula is supported by MacDonald & Swart (2004), who advocate an ecosystemic approach to dealing with teachers' "sense of helplessness" and stress levels to better enable them to "care for others in the manner they are accustomed to care" (Weissbourd in MacDonald & Swart, 2004, p. 52).

We wish to conclude this section of the discussion by confirming that our findings corroborate the findings of two world-famous emotional intelligence (EI) experts, professor Maurice Elias (Professor, Department of Psychology, Rutgers University, and Director: Rutgers Social-Emotional Learning Lab on Developing Safe and Civil Schools (DSACS); personal communication, 2009) and professor Reuven Bar-On (personal communication, 2009). Elias (2009, personal communication) proposes that schools introduce disciplinary measures that are firm, clear, fair and consistent, but at the same time build a system of acknowledging positive behaviour in an appropriate manner into such a system. Learners should feel part of the process to restore discipline and they should feel that there is good reason for them to regulate their conduct and to act in a civilized manner in classrooms. Teachers, on the other hand, need to find ways to make their classrooms attractive and inviting. Learners should be allowed to contribute to debates on ways in which behaviour should be regulated. In other words, a system of applicable recognition of "positive" action should be built into such a system.

## **CONCLUSION**

Maree's (2000; 2005) description of certain schools as "war zones" seems less alarmist in 2010 than it did a number of years ago. The themes that emerged during his research included new reports published daily on the escalation of violence in schools and a puzzling and worrying lack of decisive leadership in the war against violence in South African schools. These still hold true, perhaps just to an even greater extent than was the case then. Furthermore, some teacher education students

seem to believe that the solution to stemming the tide of violence is as simplistic as reinstating corporal punishment. Regrettably, this type of linear thinking does not contribute positively to the currently raging debates in the field regarding, amongst others, underlying causes of violence and ways to curb this scourge. Meta-theoretical thinking is required instead.

As was again pointed out by participants in the current study, holding a national indaba and involving all relevant stakeholders on a regular basis may shed more light on the question of burgeoning violence in South African schools. This includes involving education authorities, lecturers at universities, healthcare professionals, learners, parents, the SAPS, legal experts and teacher education students, as well as reconsidering teacher education curricula to include modules on dealing with violence in schools and their direct communities.

We sincerely hope that our article adds to the knowledge base in this field by exploring and highlighting the views of teacher education students, who will play a significant role in the continuing battle against violence in our schools in the future. After all, stable schools in stable environments are the cornerstone of our survival. Schools can and should help to negotiate the tsunami of violence that is currently threatening our very existence.

Lastly, we wish to end with Maree's recent response to a question posed during a live radio interview (Maree, 2010): What in your view are the contributing factors that bring out violent behaviour in children? "It seems as if they have lost respect for parents, teachers and even animals. "In the words of a global expert, Professor Maurice Elias (Rutgers University, USA): 'This is a systems issue; breakdown of discipline is related to breakdown of social norms in society, neighbourhoods, and the schools'. Clearly, then, the place to start if we wish to impact on ever-increasing levels of violence, is society at large. Teachers in our schools cannot do this on their own. Dealing with the problem needs to start at the highest level, namely the South African government".

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