

Investigating Violence-related Behaviors among Learners in Rural Schools in South Africa

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ABSTRACT Learners' safety, social well-being and academic success are a product of a proactive and supportive school and home environments. This study investigated violence-related behaviours among rural learners in ten rural secondary schools within the Vhembe district of South Africa. A cross-sectional descriptive survey design was adopted using self-response questionnaires to collect data from a total of 334 randomly selected learners aged between 14 and 25 years. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. In this study almost 1 in 10 males (n=19; 12.4%) and females (n=21; 11.7%) participants felt that the safety of learners in the school environment was poor. Sixty-one (39.9%) of male participants alluded that their schools experienced vandalism and theft of school property. Among the males, 3(2%) admitted ever carrying a knife to school; and in addition, 41(27%) males and 53(29.8%) females indicated that their schools experienced faction fights in the past three months. This situation calls for school-based behaviour modification and intervention programmes which must be monitored by all stakeholders. In addition, school-based management and governing bodies must be adequately empowered to handle violent situations and security issues within and outside the perimeter of the learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Though violence in any form is a criminal act, it is becoming endemic in our society without sparing schools. Nearly 565 young people aged 10-29 die through interpersonal violence every day (World Conference on Youth 2014). In South Africa, many acts of school violence were on the increase and are assuming dangerous proportion; and between 2011 and 2012, Bhan (2015) reported that 40.1 percent of all sexual offences in South Africa involved youths under 18 years. In the 2012 National School Violence study in South Africa, Burton and Leoschut (2013) found that 12.2 percent of learners had been threatened by someone, 6.3 percent had been assaulted, 4.7 percent had been sexually assaulted or raped and 4.5 percent had been robbed at school. According to Burton and Leoschut (2013), violence in schools has garnered considerable media attention in South Africa in recent years. The latest on school violence was reported under a newspaper caption: "8-year-old dies after being beaten and kicked by bullies" by the City Press (2014: 1-3). Despite the horrific exposure of this scourge in a number of South African news media (City Press 2014; eNews Channel Africa eNCA 2013a; News24 2012), the problem still continued unabated.

School violence manifests in many behavioural forms that include bullying, classroom

aggression, gun use, gang activity etc. (Akin-sola and Ramakuella 2010; Furlong et al. 2005).

In a study to analyse the relationships between violent behaviours of adolescent students and pre-disposing factors, Povedano et al. (2015) established that there is a direct positive relationship between victimization and relational violent behavior ($p < 0.001$). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC 2013a) and Refaat (2004), violence and health-risk behaviours contribute hugely to the leading causes of morbidity and mortality among youths and adults. Under the category of behaviours that contribute to unintentional and intentional injuries in the United States (US), statistics reveal that 18.3 percent of youths carried a weapon and 36.6 percent were in a physical fight during the past year (CDC 1997). Though in the 2004 US Department of Education and Justice annual report, Furlong et al. (2005) cited De Voe et al. (2004) as reporting that between 1993 and 2003, the percentages of learners reporting that they had a fight on school property and carrying a weapon at school in the past 30 days declined from 16 percent to 13 percent and 12 percent to 6 percent respectively; but these declines still indicate the unbearable elements of violence in the school environment with some resulting in death as mentioned earlier.

Violence is multi-faceted; hence, David-Ferdon and Simon (2012) are of the view that broad-

er social and cultural climate that revolves around the schools can affect the likelihood of school violence. For example, cyber devices (cell phones, computers etc.) have some negativity associated with them. Alluding to this, eNCA (2013b) points out that bullying problem in schools has been made worse by the proliferation of cell phones and mobile devices, which has led to growth in potentially harmful cyber-bullying as well.

School violence is preventable. Learners' academic success and social well-being is a product of safe and supportive school and home environments, including healthy social relations (Guedes et al. 2015). CDC (2013b) argues that prevention efforts by teachers, administrators, parents and community members can reduce and improve the overall school environment. Positive relationships between learners and their pro-social peers, teachers and families can be critical assets in promoting youth's well-being and preventing school violence (CDC 2013b). Consistent with this notion, Furlong et al. (2005) propose that garnering parent and community support in developing and maintaining an efficient and responsive violence prevention programme is necessary to intervention success.

On the flip side, school climate and organization can equally be key in breeding peace or anarchy in the learning environment. In a study to explore educators' understanding of workplace bullying, De Wet (2014) states that bullying is likely to occur in schools where organisational chaos reigns. In such situations, the school tone will be undermined thus allowing the culture of impunity to flourish among learners and educators alike.

School violence manifests in many forms (damage to property, victimization, teasing, etc.) and has the potential of destabilizing schools and communities whilst at the same time disrupting the core business of teaching and learning (Povedano et al. 2015). Acknowledging this, the Department of Education (DoE) and Department of Health (DoH) launched the Integrated School Health Policy in 2012 with the view of supporting school communities in creating a safe and secure environment for education to thrive (DoE and DoH 2012). This calls for the understanding of some of the dynamics that come to play in schools and the homes of learners. Against this background, this study sought to investigate violence-related behaviours among

rural learners and their socio-economic backgrounds in ten secondary schools in the Vhembe district.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the purpose of the study, a quantitative cross-sectional descriptive survey design was adopted. Since the study revolves around violence-related practices, a descriptive research design was deemed suitable by the researchers because it describes and interprets phenomena that are in existence, while at the same time using a cross-sectional survey method to collect data from subjects at one point in time to describe a phenomenon (Brink 2008). Cross-sectional design also involves a once-off administration of the survey instrument to a sample. Therefore, it yields data on the desired variables as they exist at the time of the survey.

The study was conducted at Vhumbedzi educational circuit which is situated east of Sibasa in the Vhembe District and north of Kruger National Park. Out of a total learner population of 5019, a sample of 370 male and female learners was randomly selected across grades 8 to 12.

Data on demographic variables violence-related activities were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire. The instrument incorporated "yes" or "no" response options to assess some of the violence-related issues in the participants' learning environment. To ensure validity, the instrument was adapted from the YRBS questionnaire of the CDC (2011) to suit the local conditions. A wide range of literature was also consulted on the variables of interests. Furthermore, the instrument was pre-tested on some volunteer learners in a school similar to the target population. The reliability of the instrument was bolstered by adapting a questionnaire based largely upon the CDC (2011) national high school YRBS.

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 software and Microsoft Excel. Being a purely descriptive study, summary statistics (percentages, mean etc.) were used. Frequencies and percentages of responses to the questions were computed and represented frequency distribution tables and graphs.

Ethical clearance certificate (SHS/12/PH/03/0812) for the study was issued by the Research and Innovation Directorate of the University of

Venda. Permissions to conduct the research and to gain access to the schools were obtained from the DoH – Limpopo province and the Vhumbedzi circuit office respectively. Written informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents before the administration of the instrument. Anonymity, confidentiality and voluntary participation were assured.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

A total of 334 learners participated in the study and of this figure 180 (53.9%) were females. Participants' ages ranged from 12 to 24 years with mean ages of 16.82 ± 1.97 years for males and 16.78 ± 2.23 years for females. As shown in Table 1, the majority ($n = 223$; 66.77%) were in the 15-20 age group. Whilst only 2 (0.60%) of the participants were of Mushangana ethnic origin, an overwhelming majority ($n = 329$; 98.5%) indicated that they were of the Muvenda ethnic group. The dominant faith among the participants was the Christian religion where 321 (96.97%) identified with, and this was followed by 9 (2.72%) participants who reported belonging to the Traditional religion. Almost 1 in 3 (27.8%) participants came from grade 10 and the

least number ($n = 30$; 9.0%) of participants came from grade 12.

Violence-Related Issues in the Participants' Learning Environment

Though the awareness level of dangers associated with school violence ranged from 64.97 percent - 86.84 percent among the participants, in all four cases there were more males (86.84%, 74.50%, 76.22% and 81.08%) than females (79.55%, 64.97%, 72.73% and 76.57%) who indicated that they were aware of the dangers associated with carrying weapons, being bullied, bullying others and physical fights respectively (Table 1). Also in all four areas, the school was the main provider of information on dangers associated with carrying of weapons ($n = 115$; 55.29%), being bullied ($n = 74$; 42.78%), bullying ($n = 79$; 42.93%) and physical fights ($n = 54$; 28.72%).

On the question of violence in the school environment, almost equal number of male ($n = 19$; 12.42%) and female ($n = 21$; 11.67%) participants reported that the safety of learners is poor whilst almost 1 one in three males ($n = 46$; 30.06%) and one in five females ($n = 35$; 19.44%) said it was fair. As shown in Table 2, both male and female participants reported indulging in some

Table 1: Awareness and source of information on school-related dangers

| Awareness of dangers | Male participants | | Female participants | |
|---|--|--|--|----------------------------------|
| | Yes n (%) | No n (%) | Yes n (%) | No n (%) |
| Dangers associated with carrying weapons at school | 132(86.84) | 20(13.16) | 140(79.55) | 36(20.45) |
| Dangers of being bullied at school | 111(74.50) | 38(25.50) | 115(64.97) | 62(35.03) |
| Dangers of bullying others at school | 109(76.22) | 34(23.78) | 128(72.73) | 48(27.27) |
| Dangers of physical fights | 120(81.08) | 28(18.92) | 134(76.57) | 41(23.43) |
| Source of information on dangers associated with violence | Dangers associated with carrying weapons at school n (%) | Dangers of being bullied at school n (%) | Dangers of bullying others at school n (%) | Dangers of physical fights n (%) |
| Mother | 20(9.62) | 22(12.77) | 21(11.41) | 30(15.96) |
| Father | 14(6.70) | 23(13.29) | 20(10.87) | 28(14.90) |
| Relatives | 10(4.80) | 16(9.25) | 20(10.87) | 22(11.70) |
| School | 115(55.29) | 74(42.78) | 79(42.93) | 54(28.72) |
| Health facilities | 14(6.73) | 11(6.36) | 12(6.52) | 12(6.38) |
| Peers | 4(1.92) | 4(2.31) | 13(7.07) | 12(6.38) |
| Print media, books, magazines, etc. | 8(3.85) | 8(4.62) | 8(4.35) | 8(4.26) |
| Electronic media, internet etc. | 16(7.69) | 11(6.36) | 9(4.89) | 16(8.51) |
| Other sources | 7(3.37) | 4(2.31) | 2(1.09) | 6(3.19) |
| Total | 208(100.00) | 173(100.00) | 184(100.00) | 188(100.00) |

violent activities though not on equal basis. Though more males ($n = 25$; 16.56%) than females ($n = 22$; 12.29%) admitted having assaulted or been assaulted by a learner at school, almost one in four males ($n = 37$; 24.50%) and females ($n = 44$; 25.29%) alluded to the occurrence of bullying in their school in the past three-months. In the same vein, fewer males ($n = 41$; 26.97%) than females ($n = 53$; 29.78%) answered in the affirmative that there were incidents of gang or faction fights among learners in their schools in the past three months. In addition, almost two in five males ($n = 61$; 39.87%) and one in three females ($n = 57$; 32.20%) reported that their schools experienced vandalism, theft and damage to school property in the past six months.

DISCUSSION

The survey was initiated to investigate violence-related practices among rural learners.

According to Tugli (2012), knowledge is power, and the essence of knowledge is to guide one to make informed choices and right decisions. In this study, 65 percent to 87 percent of participants indicated that they were aware of dangers associated with carrying of weapons to school, bullying, fighting etc. In all these cases, schools served as the main providers of dangers associated with violence-related behaviours. However, awareness of dangers and repercussion of violent behaviours does not necessarily guarantee safe learning environment and community.

It is very difficult to divorce a school from a community because violence can spill over from one setting to another. Attesting to this, Burton and Leoschut (2013) in the 2012 National School Violence Survey reported that 60.5 percent of learners who had experienced violence at school claimed that crime was a problem in their neighborhood. Since Povedano et al. (2015) established in their study that there is a significant relationship between victimization and relation-

Table 2: Participants' responses to violence related activities at school

| <i>Awareness of dangers</i> | <i>Male participants</i> | | <i>Female participants</i> | |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| | <i>Yes n (%)</i> | <i>No n (%)</i> | <i>Yes n (%)</i> | <i>No n (%)</i> |
| Have you ever carried a knife to school in the past 3 months? | 3 (1.96) | 150 (98.04) | 3 (1.67) | 177 (98.33) |
| Have you ever carried a club or a knobkerrie to school in the past 3-months? | 2 (1.32) | 149 (98.68) | 4 (2.23) | 175 (97.77) |
| Have you carried a gun to school in the past 3-months? | 2 (1.32) | 149 (98.68) | 3 (1.72) | 171 (98.28) |
| Have you assaulted or been assaulted by any learner in the past 3-months at school? | 25 (16.56) | 126 (83.44) | 22 (12.29) | 157 (87.71) |
| Have you injured or been injured by another learner in a fight at school in the past 3-months? | 22 (14.38) | 131 (84.62) | 22 (12.22) | 158 (87.78) |
| Have you threatened or been threatened by learners with weapons at school or on your way to/from school in the past 3-months? | 18 (11.76) | 135 (88.24) | 9 (5.00) | 171 (95.00) |
| Have there been incidents of rape in your school in the past 3-months? | 15 (9.93) | 136 (90.07) | 14 (8.00) | 161 (92.00) |
| Have there been incidents of gang/faction fights in your school in the past 3-months? | 41 (26.97) | 111 (73.03) | 53 (29.78) | 125 (70.22) |
| Have there been incidents of bullying in your school in the past 3-months? | 37 (24.50) | 114 (75.50) | 44 (25.29) | 130 (74.71) |
| Have there been incidents of murder of learners in your school in the current academic year? | 18 (11.76) | 135 (88.24) | 8 (4.47) | 171 (95.53) |
| Has your school experienced vandalism, theft or damage by learners in the past 6-months? | 61 (39.87) | 92 (60.13) | 57 (32.20) | 120 (67.80) |

al violent behavior ($p < 0.001$), empowerment of learners on issues of violence should involve all stakeholders (Furlong et al. 2005).

Indulgence in violence-related activities in this study cuts across gender divide. The study found that one in 10 participants reported that their school environments are unsafe; two in five males and a third of the female participants reported that their schools experienced vandalism and theft of school property. Consistent with these findings, Burton and Leoschut (2013) allude that fear is common within South African schools. They further argue that schools seem to be places that elicit feelings of fear.

Violence in any form or shape breeds tension and incurs reprisals and revenge. In this study, a quarter of both male (24.5%) and female (25.3%) participants in this study admitted bullying others or being bullied; and about 27 percent of males as against 30 percent of females reported incidents of gang violence and faction fights. Whist 12 percent of male and 4.55 percent of female participants reported that their schools experienced murder, between 1 percent and 3 percent of the participants admitted ever carrying a gun, knife or a knobkerrie to school in the past 3 months. Gang violence has the propensity of creating panic even among adults. Alluding to this, Ang et al. (2015) argue that given the positive link between gangs and crime, a better understanding of factors related to youth gang membership is critical. In August 2013, Western Cape Department of Education was compelled to close all schools in the Manenberg for the rest of a week over safety concerns as a result of gang violence (eNCA 2013a). This situation compromised learning and teaching in affected schools and communities.

Bullying is like a monster that has the potential of devouring its own offspring. In line with this assertion, People Magazine South Africa (2014) points out that bullying is the most common form of violence where 15-30 percent of teens have been involved; yet two-thirds of teens believe schools' and adults' responses and interventions are infrequent, ineffective and sometimes belated. The impact of bullying need not be underestimated. According to a Johannesburg-based psychologist, Sandra Brownrigg, bullying has severe long-term effects on a child's mental and physical health; and she concludes by saying:

“Victims of bullying are more likely to suffer physical problems such as common colds and coughs, sore throats, poor appetite, and night waking. Being bullied affects your concentration at school and results in a drop in school performance. Bullying affects the victim's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. Teens may start to withdraw socially and become depressed. Some may take weapons to school for protection or consider suicide as the only escape. Research has shown that even years after being bullied, past victims have higher levels of depression and poorer self-esteem than other adults” (People Magazine South Africa 2014: 3).

Bullying is likely to incur reprisals. A case in point was captioned as: *“Teen held for killing school ‘bully’”* by News24 (2012: 1). This source quoted the police as saying: *“an East Rand Grade 11 pupil was arrested for shooting dead a fellow pupil he accused of bullying him”*. Another dimension to this violence-related school drama was reported and captioned as: *“8-year-old dies after being beaten and kicked by bullies”* (City Press 2014: 3).

Incidents such as these are just the tip of the iceberg and are an indication of a simmering culture of impunity that will soon consume everyone in its path. In light of this, violence in any form or shape especially in school environment is not acceptable. It can breed fear, anarchy, indiscipline and reprisals; it can cause indelible physical and emotional scars and compromise academic and social development. In a nutshell, School violence is multi-dimensional; hence CDC (2013a: 1) alludes that:

“No one factor in isolation causes school violence, so stopping school violence involves using multiple prevention strategies that address the many individual, relationship, community, and societal factors that influence the likelihood of violence.”

CONCLUSION

The study found that rural schools are fraught with violence-related activities by learners. Some of these violent activities seemed to be induced by fear, insecurity, self-protection and revenge. It also points to the fact that there is lack of appropriate response to tackling acts of violence and that in itself encourages a permissible culture of impunity and rage in the learning environment. The question that comes to

mind is: *who is in authority and how is authority exercised to curb acts of violence and misconduct in schools?* Undeniably, there are so many serious and adverse consequences that emanate from violence which include physical and emotional injuries as well as death. No matter which side of the divide one stands either as a perpetrator or a passive observer, we are all affected directly or indirectly by any act of violence.

Above all, school violence is not only a social problem but also a public health issue that revolves around a holistic state of well-being of individuals in a population. It is, therefore, imperative to put all hands on deck in order to create a safe supportive school environment devoid of bullying, aggressive behavior, weapon use and organized gang activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School-based behavior modification and intervention programmes designed with inputs from all stakeholders (community structures, educators, learners, unions etc.) should be introduced in all schools and at all phases. In addition, school-based management and governing bodies must be adequately empowered to deal with discipline, violence-related crisis and security within and outside the perimeter of the learning environments.

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