

Gang-related Violence in South African Schools

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on a primarily qualitative study which also employed some quantitative research methods in collecting data in six provinces in South Africa. In order to get at the lived reality of gang-related violence in schools, qualitative research was used and to get an overall picture of gang-related violence in South African schools, quantitative research was also used. Data was collected from a range of members of the school governing bodies namely learners, parents, teachers and non-teaching staff. The results confirm the enormity of gang-related violence in schools. Findings showed that the fear of gang-related violence at school can be as harmful as primary victimisation and personal experiences of violence, causing learners to drop out or avoid school, or to lose concentration in the classroom and in learners developing healthy pro-social relationships as actual victimisation. It was also found gang violence is a destructive phenomenon and has a negative effect on the delivery of quality of education. The study is concluded with recommendations extracted from relevant literature as well as comments expressed by the participants of this study. Through collective ownership, responsibility and self-reliance, communities can succeed in reducing the incidence and prevalence of violence within their community. A standardised code of conduct and school safety policy are vital tools in the prevention and management of school-based violence, but should be adjusted to meet the school's specific needs regarding violence and discipline. Schools should have access to effective psychological support to counter the effects of violence and to foster and reinforce effective coping strategies. Whilst this study intends to improve our understanding of school-related violence and fill some of the gaps identified by previous studies, it is clear that further research is needed.

INTRODUCTION

School-based violence is a well-recorded, global occurrence (Vreeman and Carroll 2007; Greeff and Grobler 2008; Dussich and Maekoya 2007; Swearer and Espelage 2004; Pellegrini and Long 2004). For example in the United States of America incidence of school base violence has doubled between 1989 and 1995 (Gasa 2005:70; Fisher and Kettle 2003:79-83; Hester 2003:17; Chandler et al. 1998). Where the school has been constructed as a space in which children can come and learn in a safe and protected environment, it appears that this is unfortunately not the case in the majority of schools worldwide (Pinnock 1996; Dissel 1997; Prince 2005; Standing 2003).

In South African schools the scourge of violence is cause for concern. Learners and teachers in schools all across South Africa are threatened by violence. They find themselves in an unenviable difficulty where violence features daily. The following are captions of various recent newspaper articles: 'Bullying at schools reaches epidemic proportions' (Mthethwa 2006), 'Dealing with school bullies' (Kistnasamy 2006), 'Learning fear at school' (Naran 2006), 'Alarming trend of abuse' (editorial in Daily News of 5/

09/2006), 'Pupil stabbed for soccer ball' (Mbongwa 2006), 'Schoolboy slain for cell phone' (Laganparsad 2006) 'Student stabbed by classmate' (editorial in Chatsworth Tabloid of 18/01/2006), and 'Teachers attacked in front of pupils' (Barbeau 2006). This impact negatively on education and what happens in the school in particular.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Annual Report (2001:10) on South Africa emphasises the fact that "...many schools are places of crime, violence, fear and intimidation and trauma, which consistently disrupting the normal functioning of schools." Gang violence, weapons in school, sexual violence, assault, theft, robbery and vandalism are, to varying degrees, part of the daily reality for learners and teachers (Braun 2007: 4). Research undertaken by the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cape Town (2001) in 20 primary and secondary schools in the Cape Metropole and surrounding areas indicates that crime and gang-related violence are common occurrences in schools in the Western Cape.

Although not all schools experience the same types or levels of gang-related violence, there are themes that run through the literature which point to at least four specific manifestations of

gang-related violent behavior that broadly affect schools in the country (Steyn and Janse van Rensburg 2010; Department of Education 1999; Burton and Leoschut 2012). These include, but are not limited to: lack of respect for, and threats against teachers; weapons in schools; bullying; and sexual violence and harassment

Lack of Respect For, and Threats Against Teachers

Today's teachers are faced with a number of challenges. They are expected to teach a population that is increasingly diverse not only in terms of unique cultural backgrounds, but also in terms of academic, behavioral and social skill sets. Teachers are expected to achieve high academic standards for all learners; accommodate learners with exceptionalities in inclusive settings; and serve learners who exhibit gang-related violent behavior that stem from the growing incivility of our society (Lane et al. 2009: 111).

And in many communities, teachers are attempting to meet these goals within communities with increasing rates of poverty, homelessness, unemployment and reduced budgets for public education. Although "lack of respect" might seem like a vague concept that is minimally relevant to the issue of serious gang-related violence in schools, this problem destabilizes many South African school environments and contributes to high levels of stress on the part of South African teachers (Braun 2007: 7).

The Human Rights Commission's Public Hearings on School Violence and the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA) maintained that learners in South African schools widely demonstrate a blatant disregard for their teachers. Learners regularly swear at their teachers and engage in "shouting, back chatting, laughing in [the teacher's] face and the abuse of alcohol and dagga at sports meetings" (Hayward 2002: 47; De Wet 2003: 95).

According to the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (2006), this type of verbal abuse has been linked to low teacher morale, stress, and absenteeism. The submission made by the South African Teachers' Union to the South African Human Rights Commission echoed these concerns about verbal abuse in schools, and its impact on teachers. Abuse from both learners and parents resulted

in emotional and psychological trauma for teachers. Affected teachers felt insecure and unable to manage their classroom environments effectively. This had led to some teachers to resign (South African Teachers Union 2006). The fear that results from this kind of intimidation from the learner population is not unfounded – there have been numerous reported cases in South Africa where learners have physically assaulted and even killed their teachers (Naidu 2007). Nokulunga Ndala, a KwaZulu-Natal teacher, was stabbed to death by a pupil she had accused of attempting to cheat during a geography test in March (Naidu 2007). This kind of violence signals a concerning development in education, and requires immediate and effective intervention.

Weapons in Schools

The problem of gang-related violence in schools is exacerbated by the number of weapons brought onto school property by learners (Akiba et al. 2002; Zulu et al. 2004: 70; Kasiram et al. 1996: 373-377). According to Burton (2008: 48-49) weapons, drugs and alcohol are available in many schools across the country. For example: 3 in 10 learners at secondary school know fellow learners who have brought weapons to schools; 3 in 10 report that it is easy to organise a knife, and 1 in 10 report that it is easy to organise a gun. With such easy access to substances and weapons, it is not unanticipated that levels of gang-related violence in South African schools would be so high. Jones (2001: 169) offers the following insight - "Probably more people are carrying weapons today than at any time in history. These are most commonly used in schools" These weapons are not limited to traditional items such as guns or knives – learners in South Africa have been known to turn benign objects such as bottles or pencils into weapons when they experience conflict with other individuals (Khosa 2006). Learners are also bringing serious weapons such as guns onto school property, which is an issue of great concern (Braun 2007: 13). A study by Eliazov and Frank (2000: 22) of twenty schools in the Western Cape Province showed that the carrying of weapons was particularly widespread where intimidation, drug abuse and gangsterism were present. According to the National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa (2006), when learners come to school armed, mundane

conflicts have a greater likelihood of escalating and becoming highly violent or even deadly. Incidents of school stabbings are commonly reported in the media (Ngcukana 2007: 3; Prince 2005: 1; Ngcukana 2008: 1; Sokopo 2009: 1). The Eye Witness News (01 March 2012) reported that a 16-year-old boy was killed at Beauvallon Secondary School in Valhalla Park, Western Cape. In another incident a learner was stabbed by another learner during break time. Three others were wounded. The Citizen (02 March 2012) reported that an 18-year-old boy was stabbed once in the neck and died outside the school gates of Vorentoe High School in Auckland Park, Johannesburg, allegedly in a fight over a ball. The seriousness of these incidents has provoked extensive debate about the safety of schools in South Africa.

Such incidents are also not unusual in other countries as well. In the United States of America the result of incidents like the 1999 massacre of pupils at Columbine High School in Columbia, caused a national outcry and increased the emphasis, not only on the availability of weapons as a nationwide problem. In another incident in South West Germany, a teenager went on a rampage at his former high school, killing sixteen people by discharging his father's gun (Yeoman and Charter 2009: 9).

Bullying

Bullying is a pervasive problem in schools. Disrespect and violence directed at teachers in schools is a significant problem, but it is important to recognize that learners are also the victims of verbal and physical abuse (bullying) in schools (Braun 2007: 8). Bullying as a form of gang-related school based violence has been known to be a serious problem in schools in many countries for many years but little seems to have changed (Roland and Munthe 1989; Oshako 1997; Ruiz 1998). Bullying is possibly the most common and well-known manifestation of gang-related school based violence. The levels and intensity of bullying actions have increased with time (South African Human Rights Commission 2008:6). Bullying refers to both repetitive physical and non-physical acts (Olweus 1993; Rigby 1996; Smith and Sharp 1994). Physical bullying includes pushing, hitting, kicking, biting, spitting, intentional damage to property, theft and even extortion (O'Connell et al. 1999:

438). Non-physical bullying includes teasing, name-calling, whispering campaigns, exclusion and threats of harm (Shariff 2004: 224). Olweus (1999: 27) defines bullying as a subset of aggressive behaviour that is expressed in an open, direct way (for example, physically hitting, kicking, punching someone; verbally threatening, insulting, teasing, taking belongings), and/or in a relational, indirect way (for example, spreading rumours, gossiping, excluding and isolating someone from a group). Gang membership is seen as synonymous with these actions. Acts of bullying as a form of gang-related school based violence are therefore violent, protracted, and has to do with obtaining power and control over other learners (Rossouw and Stewart 2008: 251).

Bullying as a form of gang-related school based violence is a problem in South African schools. According to Rademeyer (2006) and Reddy (2006) bullying in South Africa has reached frightening levels. Numerous newspaper articles are published on the prevalence of bullying in South African schools (De Bruin 2005:3; Smit 2005: 5; De Vries 2004: 4; Kalideen 2004:1). According to one of these articles, a ten-year-old Pretoria boy is fighting for his life after he was hanged in the school's bathroom by his schoolmates (De Bruin 2005: 3). Research conducted by Liang et al. (2007: 161-171) in Cape Town and Durban found that 36.3% of learners were involved in bullying, either as bullies or victims, or both. Apart from the distress and unhappiness caused, this could also result in absenteeism and some victims moving away to another school to escape the problem (Bloom 2009; Duncan 1999, 2006). Lyans cited in Elliot et al. (1998: 170) asserts that there is sufficient evidence showing how children exposed to bullying as a form of gang-related school based violence experience adverse developmental problems, for example, lessened ability for concentration, sleep disturbances, flashbacks, a fatalistic outlook toward their future.

The current status of bullying as a form of gang-related violence in South African schools has been described in preceding paragraphs as generally bleak. Therefore intervention/corrective measures must be designed to curb the high incidents of bullying in schools.

Sexual Violence and Harassment

Physical assault is not the only form of assault that affects South African schools. Sadly,

one of the most pervasive and traumatizing forms of gang-related violence that takes place in the South African school system is sexual violence and harassment. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) defines sexual harassment as any “unwanted or unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature or other conduct based on sex”, which makes the victim feel uncomfortable (Van Meelis 1999: 74). This conduct may be in the form of unwanted physical, verbal or non-verbal behaviour (Van Meelis 1999: 74).

The approach in South Africa is very similar to that in the USA. According to the definition of the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when the victims employment is affected by the rejection of or submission to such conduct, or when the rejection of or submission to the perpetrators conduct unreasonably interferes with an individual’s work performance or creates a hostile, offensive or intimidating work environment (United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2007: 1).

Sexual violence and harassment as a form of gang-related school violence is a problem in South African schools that cannot be ignored. In their comprehensive report on sexual violence in South African schools, Human Rights Watch (2001) noted that:

“Sexual assault occurs in prestigious, predominantly white schools, in impoverished, predominantly black township schools, in schools for the learning disabled, and even in primary schools.”

In a study by the African Gender Institute of the University of Cape Town in which learners from a secondary school in Khayelitsha were interviewed, sexual violence and harassment was found to be a considerable problem (Musaka 1999: 58-60). The problem of sexual violence and harassment was also highlighted by Fineran et al. (2001: 211, 215-216) in a study among 261 South African learners aged 14 to 18. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of the learners indicated that they experienced some form of sexual violence or harassment. Research has shown that girls are sexually harassed and abused significantly more than boys (Fineran et al. 2001: 212, 214; Abrahams et al. 2006: 751-754; De Wet 2008). The Human Rights Watch (2001) also reported that sexual violence and harassment of girls by their male peers occurred widely in South Afri-

can schools. Research conducted by Mitchell (2005: 95) revealed that girls are raped, sexually abused, sexually harassed and assaulted at school by male learners. In a study by Abrahams et al. (2006: 753) girls described how boys would grab their breasts, buttocks and genitals to force them to hand over valuables like money or food. In addition, they are harassed by the possibility of unwanted pregnancy and emotional pressure, and are denied their self-respect (Human Rights Watch 2001).

Sexual harassment as a form of gang-related school based violence is a threat to effective education and impacts on the learner’s rights to equal education opportunities. It also affects the physical and emotional well-being of learners and influences their overall school performance as well as the reaching of career goals. The school should be a secure environment wherein learners are free to learn and grow, but sexual harassment stops that process (Office of Civil Rights 2008: 1).

Education is a fundamental right of each and every child. The South African Constitution and legislation contains provisions to protect the rights of both learners to learn and teachers to teach in a safe environment free from all forms of violence. These rights are or have the potential of being infringed by the perpetuation of school-based gang violence or the tangible threat thereof (Burton 2008: 12).

Why This Study?

It is hoped that this study will contribute to national and international debates on gang-related violence in schools. It is different from most of the studies conducted in this area as it uses a range of stakeholders of the school community – learners, parents, teachers, school governing body members in garnering information on issues of gang-related violence across six different provinces in South Africa. The study is also high on validity and reliability since it utilises a variety of data collection instruments namely interviews, observations, and a questionnaire. Also, it is hoped that it contributes to developing theories on school gang violence by looking beyond incidents and types of violence in an attempt to understand more about both how and why schools play a part in both reproducing and perpetrating gang-related violence.

While the study recognises and details how gang violence within the broader society impacts on schools, it is however the beliefs, practices,

and behaviours within schools that sanction gang violence – either directly or by omission by doing nothing – that are the real significance of this study. This study is not only exploring the problem in South Africa within a wider international context but is also suggesting some underlying reasons for the prevalence of gang violence in South African schools and what might be done to improve the situation.

Theoretical Framework

The scourge of gang-related violence in South African schools is cause for concern; daily reports appear in the written and electronic media about high levels of violence, physical and sexual abuse, and gang-related activities in our schools. This is a pervasive problem that impacts families and communities, which also spills over into school environments, exacerbating the problems schools already have with insecurity and disorder. Gangs operate with impunity in some school environments, making schools places where drugs, thugs and weapons can move as freely through the gates as pupils. Some schools are so destabilized by gangs that courses are not conducted according to any regular schedule (Human Rights Watch 2001: 34). The impact that this type of violence has on teachers and learners is extensive.

This study is conducted against the background and the theoretical framework of the German concept of *geborgenheit* (Oosthuizen 2009: 15-16). *Geborgenheit* refers to security, safety or a place of security and safety (Oxford German Dictionary in Oosthuizen 2009: 15-16), a place where education stakeholders, and especially learners are free from fears and worries and feel wholly accepted and well (Oosthuizen 2009: 16). According to Oosthuizen (2009: 18) learners are entitled to a secure and orderly environment which is conducive to learning and proper teaching. The *geborgenheit* of learners is threatened by the presence of gang-related violence in schools, and this study offers a perspective on the problem with the aim of presenting a model for dealing with gang-related violence in schools so that a secure environment may be restored.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This is a primarily qualitative study that also employed some “quantitative” research meth-

ods. In order to get at the “lived” reality of violence in schools, qualitative research was used. Semi-structured interviews with teachers, learners, principals, members of the non-teaching staff, and members of School Governing Bodies as well as focus group interviews with learners, and observations allowed the researchers to get a feel for the “flesh and blood” and more nuanced and detailed reality of what happens inside schools. This allowed the researchers to obtain insights and an understanding of the how and why of gang-related violence in schools based on the perceptions and experiences of those involved. The attempt was to get at the “truth” of gang-related violence in schools as seen by the key participants.

Questionnaires were also administered across the six provinces in order to obtain a broad, quantitative feel for the situation across South Africa. The aim was therefore to balance the reliability of using a large sample for the questionnaires to make generalisations about South Africa with the validity of more in-depth, qualitative, first hand, face to face research in the schools in order to get two different types of complementary pictures.

Sampling for qualitative research: Four secondary schools were selected from each of the six provinces for the purpose of carrying out interviews. The criteria used for selection were based on anecdotal evidence of incidences from media reports and conversations with “critical friends” (teachers, principals, ward managers, and school governors etc.).

Interviews: Interviews were used to “get under the skin” of the organisations concerned. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine the dynamics of gang-related violence in schools and the measures used to prevent it. Mertens (1998) contends that interviews allow intimate, repeated and prolonged involvement of the researcher and the participant, which enables the researcher to get to the root of what is being investigated. The total number of interviews conducted in the six provinces was 32 x 6 = 192.

Sampling Procedures for Interviews

The Sample Comprised the Following

Learners: Learners who were 14 years old were used for the sample. Two groups of learners were interviewed. One group consisted of learners who had been affected by violence,

while the second group consisted of those learners who had perpetrated violence.

Teachers: A purposive sample of two teachers (the school principal and the Life Orientation teacher for Grade 9) in each school in each province was used.

School Governors: A purposive sample of two representatives of School Governing Bodies (the chair of governors and the chair of the school's discipline, safety and security committee)

Support Staff: A purposive sample of two members of support (general assistant and a security guard in the school) in each school in each province was used.

Ethical Issues

The following ethical considerations were all honored. These are confidentiality, anonymity, withdrawal from participation and privacy.

The participants were promised anonymity and they remained anonymous regardless of the information they provided. Provision was made in the event of participants being traumatised in the process. In situations where participants were likely to be traumatised through relating traumatic experiences, free psychological counseling was to be offered through the use of the psychological services personnel

Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analysed in the form of thematic analysis. Quantitative data from the questionnaire was analysed using descriptive statistics through the services of a statistician who prepared a Statistical Package for the Social Sciencetool in which the data was captured.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm the presence of gang-related violence in the targeted schools. The most cited cause for gang-related violence affecting schools that became apparent in all six provinces was lack of respect for, and threats against, teachers, bullying, the possession of weapons and sexual assault.

There are a wide range of factors that contribute to this culture of disrespect in schools, including lack of parental support for schools, and a lack of discipline at home. Yet according

to teachers, a key factor that exacerbates this behaviour is the unbalanced promotion of human rights in schools. Learners are aware of their rights, but seldom seem to recognize the corresponding responsibility they have to respect the rights of teachers and fellow learners. Again, in answering questions posed by National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa, teachers asserted that "learners have more rights than teachers – learners intimidate teachers," and "learners misbehave intentionally under the cloak of 'rights.'"

The study found that many of the respondents had been the victims of threats or physical harm. Teachers and parents viewed bullying as 'an inevitable part of school life. Being bullied has a deleterious impact on learners schooling as well as mental and/or physical health. Victims of bullying experience anxiety, depression, diminished self-esteem, suicidal ideation, weapon-carrying and social withdrawal. Bullying is also seen to be linked to experiences of violence in the home, as children learn that violence is a primary mechanism for negotiating relationships. Children who suffer from family violence are more likely to be bullies and/or to be bullied.

A very clear relationship exists between bullying and other forms of violence, particularly criminal victimisation. Learners who are bullied at school are more susceptible to criminal victimisation and more serious forms of violence. This is particularly significant in light of the strong relationship that exists between experiences of violence and the risk of engaging in, or perpetrating, violence.

Learners carrying weapons was an issue in at least two of the schools that participated in this study. One principal had confiscated sharp objects, knives and even machetes from learners in his school, and noted that although the issue was not out of control, it was something that required vigilance on his part. Another principal maintained that learners bringing weapons to school was one of the most significant issues he and his teachers faced. They had no consistent means of identifying which learners were carrying weapons, and depended largely on reports from other learners to find out who was in possession of knives or other dangerous objects. A teacher from this school affirmed that learners bring the weapons to protect themselves from muggings en route to and from school, maintaining that this behaviour was not about

protection or revenge within the school. This is encouraging, although the teacher felt this was still a cause for serious concern in light of learner's lack of conflict resolution skills and propensity to become aggressive in the face of conflict.

South African girls continue to be raped, sexually abused, sexually harassed, and assaulted at school by male classmates and teachers. Girls who encountered sexual violence at school were raped in school toilets, in empty classrooms and hallways, and in hostels and dormitories. The study found that sexual violence in school has multiple deleterious impacts on girls' physical and psychological development and wellbeing. Fear or experience of sexual violence in schools is a major reason behind some girls' underperformance in schools and/or dropping out of school, which is reflected in girls' lower enrolment rates at the secondary school level. This in turn undermines their opportunities to learn and gain access to vital information about their and their families' rights to services.

Some types of gang-related violence affecting schools clearly originate outside the school. Gang-related violent behaviour such as bullying and male learners' sexually harassing female learners may well be learned in families and communities beyond the school. Schools are failing to deal with cases of bullying or sexual harassment even when they are reported to teachers. This is a case of gang-related violence by omission where schools know there is a problem of gang-related violence, which the evidence in this study clearly suggests they do, and does little or nothing to try to prevent it. However, this is not to say either that there is nothing that schools can do about such external gang-related violence or that such violence is completely external anyway. Firstly, a well-organised, inclusive and well-run school can do much to reduce the incidents and impact of external gang-related violence because learners and teachers are part of a community with a sense of purpose – there is something that people feel they belong to and that is worth protecting. It is the school management – the principal and school governing body – that is responsible for the day to day prevention of gang-related violence in schools, and there is considerable evidence in that schools are not being managed well and in an appropriate manner to reduce gang-related violence.

CONCLUSION

Gang-related violence is a serious problem in many South African schools – perhaps in the majority. This study based on a range of different educational personnel and using a variety of research methods has found different types of gang-related violence in schools in six out of nine South African provinces. It has also found evidence of the consequences of gang-related violence for learners.

Gang-related school violence can be prevented. This research shows that prevention efforts – by teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and even learners – can reduce gang-related violence and improve the overall school environment. No one factor in isolation causes gang-related school violence, so stopping gang-related school violence involves using multiple prevention strategies that address the many individual, relationship, community, and societal factors that influence the likelihood of gang-related violence. Prevention efforts should ultimately reduce risk factors and promote protective factors at these multiple levels of influence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Current efforts aimed at increasing basic levels of good management, school effectiveness and teacher professionalism in South African schools need to be supported and enhanced as this will also have a beneficial effect on reducing gang-related school violence. A well-ordered school is also a less violent school. However, efforts must also increasingly be made to realise this within the post-apartheid educational framework of education for democracy and peaceful conflict resolution – an effective school must also be a more democratic school; good management is more democratic management and a professional teacher operates in a more democratic manner. The more learners, parents and staff are involved in school policy and decision making, the more there is a genuine community, the more the school can resist gang related violence.

Initial teacher education needs to be more rigorous in producing professional teachers. Schools that experience problems of gang-related violence need an active safety and security committee that monitors violence; recommends

violence prevention measures; and oversees its implementation. This committee would need to advise on the necessity for, appropriateness and consequences of, any searches for drugs and weapons among learners.

Bullying as a form of gang-related violence must be recognised as a problem and acted upon in schools by staff. Each school should have clear anti-bullying policy.

The nature and causes of gang-related violence in society and in schools need to be examined and discussed in schools and teacher education.

The social nature of masculinity, and alternatives to aggressive and violent masculinity, needs to be examined and discussed in schools and in teacher education. In the light of above, there is a need to reconsider the place, nature, and content of teaching about society in South African schools. Does guidance and counselling provide a suitable vehicle? Is a new approach required? Are teachers equipped to teach controversial issues in the classroom?

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