

## Gangsterism as a Cause of Violence in South African Schools: The Case of Six Provinces

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**ABSTRACT** This paper reports on a study that was conducted in six provinces of South Africa namely Gauteng, North West, Limpopo, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga. The aims of the study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of school stakeholders of school violence and the nature of violence that takes place in South African schools. This was a qualitative study that used interviews and documents. A questionnaire was also employed for generalisation. The scourge of violence in South African schools is a 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. The findings suggest that Gangsterism is of serious concern in South African schools and is one of the external factors that exacerbate violence in schools. This is true in all provinces studied and particularly in the Western Cape and Limpopo. The study recommends that there is need to support current efforts aimed at increasing basic levels of good management, school effectiveness and teacher professionalism in South African schools. A well-ordered school is also a less violent school. Schools that experience problems of violence need an active safety and security committee that monitors violence; recommends violence prevention measures; and oversees its implementation.

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Gangsterism is a global phenomenon. The presence of gangs in schools in the United States of America has been reported as having doubled between 1989 and 1995 (Gasa 2005:70). Huizinga (1997:1) reported that youth gangs are linked to serious crime problems in elementary and secondary schools in the United States, and that scholars report much higher drug availability when gangs are active at their schools. Research also indicates that schools that have a presence of gangs have a higher violent victimization rate than those that do not have a gang presence and teenagers who are gang members are far more likely to commit serious and violent crimes than other teenagers (Huizinga 1997: 1). Crawage (2005: 45) contends that gangs in schools should be seen as a community problem in South Africa since schools are a part of the community; they reflect the problems of that community. These learners are often challenging and dismissive of legitimate authority.

Crawage (2005: 45) defines gangsterism as the evolution of an urban identity determined along racial and economic lines. It includes the formation of groups with the aim of committing violence and crime, and to defend themselves physically against violence of other groups. In addition, Musick (1995) classifies gangs into three different categories namely scavenger gangs territorial gangs and corporate gangs.

- The scavenger gang's crimes and transgressions are usually not planned, and this group's members are often low achievers or school dropouts.
- Territorial gangs are well-organized and gang members have initiation rites which separate them from non-members. Often, prospective members have to prove their loyalty to the group by fighting.
- The corporate gangs are highly structured criminal conspiracies that are organized to sell drugs - teenagers as young as fourteen could become members. All gangs have names and recognizable symbols.

Gangs emerge from within communities themselves and this phenomenon has many root causes like socioeconomic conditions (unemployment, low-income employment, and poor living conditions) all leading to conditions of poverty and deprivation (The Portfolio Committee on Education 2002). Within schools, and particularly in the Grade 4 year, the following behaviours become more and more prevalent: poor academic performance, learning difficulties, truancy, attrition antisocial behaviour due low self-esteem.

The Portfolio Committee on Education (2002) corroborates Last (2001) who contends that there are many reasons why young children choose to join a gang. In school setting learners who become easy recruits for gangsterism are those learners who are underachievers, poor learners, or have language difficulties see

themselves as losers in the academic setting. They can be easily approached by a gang and be recruited into the organisations. Last (2001) explains this well - here they become “someone”, part of an organisation of kids just like themselves. They have a new “family” whom they tend to spend more and more time with. These gang leaders recruit younger members who are unhappy and struggling. They lure them with the promise of fraternity and brotherhood. They are told that the worst that can happen to them if they commit a serious crime is two years in a juvenile facility, which is a small price to pay for belonging (Last 2001).

Several initiatives have been undertaken by the South African government in order to try curbing violence in schools and in general. For example, there is currently an initiative on gun-free society where the fire-arm holders are required to re-apply for the issue of firearm licenses; Education Laws Amendment Act 31, 2007 has been legislated and deals with search and seizure of illegal drugs and dangerous weapons from students attending the school (Department of Education 2007). The law also states that the governing body of a public school must adopt a code of conduct for the learners, after consultation with the learners, parents and educators of the school. Research is needed on its impact, and whether there is or should be a parallel code of conduct for teachers. Conceptually, this relates to whether more democratic schools are more preventive of violence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This theoretical framework draws mainly from a report of violence in schools written by Mncube and Harber (2012). The contention that schools are a microcosm of society within which they are located and that they merely reflect or mirror the violence of the broader society is a worrying factor – the fact that schools are no better than and cannot protect children from the negative elements of the broader society is not right. However, schools are not necessarily completely vulnerable to external violence in a violent society. A key factor in the extent to which schools can resist violence in the broader society is the extent to which the school is, and sees itself as, a well-organised and managed community with a determination to protect and care for its staff and learners by means of a clear approach to safety and security.

Research suggests that the more effectively the school is run, the less chance of violence coming in from the outside and the less chance of it being generated inside (Harber 2001). Further, a well-run school with a more inclusive, democratic environment helps to foster a climate of openness and a sense of ownership, commitment, and responsibility amongst all members and therefore strengthens its determination to resist external violence and minimise internal violence (Mncube and Harber 2012). Well run schools serve as role models in the fight against violence in schools – they had actually stopped using corporal punishment in line with the law, therefore both reducing an internal climate of violence and improving relationships between staff and learners. Instead, through codes of conduct, clear implementation of the rules and alternative forms of punishment, such as clearing up litter in the schools, are used to provide an ordered, safe, and essentially peaceful environment where both internal and external crime and violence are reduced to a minimum (Harber 2001).

There are many effective and well-organised schools in South Africa. Importantly, there are many examples of such schools that are functioning effectively, achieving good examination results despite the fact that some of them are situated in areas affected by poverty and poor resources (Harber 2001: 66; Bloch 2009: 5). In successful schools there is a detailed set of planning processes and systems to ensure success, no magic formula. The role of the principal is important as “teachers need the administrative efficiency and ordered predictability of a well-run school” (Bloch 2009: 136-137).

However, the problem of disorganised schools has also been recognised as a serious issue in post-apartheid South Africa for some time. Recently, the State President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, called on teachers to be “in class, on time and teaching” and to spend the rest of the day on preparation and marking (Hindle 2011), a theme he returned to in his 2012 State of the Nation Address. The research findings of this study also confirms that violence mainly occurs in classes which are unattended by teachers. It is also during this time that learners feel unsafe to be at school. In the Mail and Guardian of 02 September 2011, Duncan Hindle, a senior education official in South Africa, has argued that school accountability is lacking when even the

basic minimum terms of employment are not being complied with. He describes a situation where:

*... teachers are absent without good reason, some arrive late or leave early, and others are perhaps at school but not in class... Fridays become "early closing" days and on paydays non-attendance is the norm in many schools. Learners display similar traits ...* (Hindle 2011).

The above excerpt begs the question of what type of role models do such teachers portray to their learners?

Bloch (2009) relates, in some detail, evidence of poor educational outcomes in South Africa to poor internal organisation of the schools. Acknowledging serious problems with infrastructure in schools in relation to the supply of electricity, libraries, laboratories, computers, clean water, and suitable toilets, he also notes the enormous difficulty of recruiting competent school principals to manage all 27 000 schools in South Africa. As a result, according to Bloch:

*Schools are often not well organised, timetabling is poor, institutional process is arbitrary and ineffective. At a teaching level, haphazard planning and time management are often reflected in a poor ability to plan and timetable teaching plans for the curriculum over the year* (Bloch 2009: 82).

This is important because while a well-run, inclusive and more democratic school can help to reduce external and internal forms of violence – as the results from this study further indicate – a poorly-run and badly organised school is more prone to various forms of violence.

Schools that neither are nor well managed lead to insecurity of both teachers and learners and they provide the inroads of violence in schools making schools unsafe. This is particularly true with gangsterism and it provides the contrary of what Prinsloo (2005) refer to as a safe school. Prinsloo (2005: 5) defines a safe school as a school that is free of danger and where there is an absence of possible harm, a place where non-educators, educators and learners may work, teach and learn without fear of ridicule, intimidation, harassment, humiliation, or violence. School should be a safe environment that encourages effective teaching and learning (Prinsloo 2005:5). In addition, Squelch (2001) identifies the following features of a safe school:

- Well maintained school grounds

- Good discipline and a culture conducive to teaching and learning
- Presence of physical features such as secure walls, fencing and gates
- Buildings that are in good state of repair
- Good governance and management practices
- Absence of (or low level) of crime and violence
- Professional educator conduct

Unfortunately, the above features are absent in a disorganised and a not well-managed school. As indicated above gangsterism, clearly originate outside the school and this facilitates violence in the school. Firstly, a well-organised, inclusive and well-run school can do much to reduce the incidents and impact of external violence because learners and teachers are part of an community with a sense of purpose – there is something that people feel they belong to and that is worth protecting. Such a well-organised school may well have a safety and security committee that makes sure that there are proper fences, locks, etc. but its main strength is that loyalty and commitment to the school will reduce internal collaboration with potentially violent external individuals and groups. As opposed to a dysfunctional or laissez-faire school, such external threats will be more readily noticed and acted upon in a cohesive way.

## Research Problem

Gangsterism is one of the sources of school violence in the many provinces of South Africa, including and particularly in the Western Cape and Limpopo schools. Gangsterism as an external factor causing violence in schools cannot be singled out; internal school factors also play a role in why young people join gangs. These factors have significant implications for the ways in which schools are organised and managed and the ways in which learners do or do not see themselves as part of a genuine school community (Mncube and Harber 2012).

To address this research problem, the following questions are asked:

1. What are school stakeholders' experiences of violence in schools?
2. Which types of violence occur in schools?
3. Why does violence occur in schools?
4. What measures and initiatives have been taken to prevent violence in schools?

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participant's voice in research has a significant role in discussing research findings and for this reason excerpts from interviews were used in order to magnify the participants' views in regards to gangsterism and violence in South African schools. The findings are presented according to the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data, and they are as follows:

- Gangsterism as external violence
- Lack of security and gang violence
- Gangsterism as barrier to learning
- Gang-related policies in reducing violence

### Gangsterism as External Violence

One of the themes of external violence affecting schools that became apparent in all provinces was gangsterism and particularly so in the Western Cape. Internal school factors also play a role in why young people join gangs - these factors have significant implications for the ways in which schools are organised and managed and the ways in which learners do or do not see themselves as part of a genuine school community. In the Western Cape schools, for example Gangsterism is one of the sources of school violence. Gangsterism is, however, not restricted to one province but is found in schools throughout South Africa. In South Africa, urbanization has been characterized by a history of repression and poverty, especially of people living in townships, informal settlements and single-sex migrant hostels. This confinement, according to Crawage (2005: 45), could create an opportunity to form gangs along racial lines. He argues further that what often happens is that when families become dysfunctional and discordant many children choose to leave the family home, opting to spend their time on the streets where they are gradually drawn into gang-related and criminal activities. The sad fact of the current situation in South Africa is that, as Donald et al. (2002) point out gang violence is often born out of need and a socially disadvantaged situation. Thompkins (2000: 7) states that sometimes, innocent learners can be drawn or forced into violent behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse by joining gangs, as this provides them with a sense of belonging. Furthermore, Thompkins points out that one of the reasons that learners for instance, easily identify with

street gangs is that they believe that such associations fulfil the need for the transition from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. They are also made to feel accepted by and important in a society that is ruled by gang leaders. Barbarin and Richter (2001: 203) argue that youngsters may, on the other hand, suffer psychological trauma and encounter social alienation, resentment and suspicion from their families and community as a consequence of their involvement in gang-related activities. It is important that teachers understand the nature of all these feelings of aggression when developing a disciplinary plan for their schools.

It is argued that gangs in schools should be seen as a community problem in South Africa and, since schools are a microcosm of its community, as such; schools reflect the problems of that community. One school principal from the Western Cape said,

*Gang violence is another type of violence that we are exposed to.... and that also exposes the school to a particular type of violence, and what happens here is that whatever happens in the community impacts on the school, so we are also exposed to ....especially in the coloured community.....gangs is part of the fabric of that community. There is a huge number of gangs in any coloured community especially given the social community background that people lives in here.... there is a lot of gangs in these areas.... (Principal Western Cape).*

### Lack of Security and Gang Violence

According to the Western Cape Education Department (WCED 2003), gangs appear to choose the arrival and departure times of educators and learners deliberately, and they wait for learners at the school gate. This brings with it a terrorising "fear factor" which traumatises educators, learners and parents. Findings from a school in KwaZulu-Natal corroborate the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) in the above contention. Lack of proper fencing of the school provides access for criminals, latecomers and those learners who are absconding from classes. By entering the school through this opening, the gangs are able to access the school to sell drugs to the learners; intimidate learners and teachers; and take their valuables like cell phones, money and school bags. Learners and teachers feel very much unsafe the lack of secu-

riety in the school. The fencing has not been repaired for a long time now. One teacher from KwaZulu-Natal said,

*The school is surrounded by a concrete wall, but at the back of the wall a fence has been removed by criminals and has never been repaired. This provides access for criminals, late-comers and those learners who are absconding from classes. By entering the school through this opening, outsiders are able to access the school to sell drugs to the learners; intimidate them; and take their valuables like cell phones, money and school bags. Learners and teachers are very uncomfortable about this opening in the school fence. The fencing has not been repaired for a long time now. The main outcry from both the SGB and the district officials is the lack of funds for school maintenance.*

The main cause of poor fencing is due to the lack of financial provisioning from the Provincial Department of Education. Owing to the lack of proper fencing this school has lost what it already had. For example, a lot has been illegally removed/stolen from the school, for example, computers, typewrites, chairs including office chairs, fridge/microwave, toilet seats, electrical connectors including plugs, electric bulbs, electric wires and fuse boxes, and phone receivers. These are stolen by the community members in order to build their dwellings/homes.

Corroborating what was found in a school in KwaZulu-Natal, and witnessing lack of adequate provisioning by the provincial Department of Education, another teacher noted,

The school is surrounded by old, corrugated iron fencing with many openings, some of which are large enough to just walk through, and this compromise the security of the school in a variety of ways:

Many disadvantages of poorly maintained schools were suggested by teachers, for example,

- Unwelcome outsiders come in during the day.
- Learners move out (sneak out) any time unnoticed.
- Controlling late coming for learners is impossible.
- At night security personnel can't protect the property since they can't monitor all the openings around the school.
- At night the school is burgled on a regular basis and valuables such as computers, TVs, radios, and some educational

materials and documents including reports, school stamps, and examination papers are stolen daily.

Lack of adequate fencing leads to lack of safety of most schools in KwaZulu-Natal and in many other provinces.

### **Gangsterism as Barrier to Learning**

This study found in the interviews that during gangster fights both learners and educators are terrified of being caught in crossfire, not only at school, but also on their way to school and on their way back home. Therefore they opt not to go to school until the situation is calm and this has a negative on teaching and learning. Gang related violence has serious negative consequences. For example one principal from the Western Cape said,

*Last year, we experienced random shooting in front of the school gate, whereby two gangs were shooting at each other and a stray bullet hit a learner and up till today we don't know who the person is that shot the girl, and in the community that we live in a lot of our kids, during the time of gang violence in the area, get caught in the cross fire and they miss out a substantial amount of academic time. We have learners who have been shot in a leg or stomach and some paralysed for life because of stray bullets during gang shootings. Last year, we buried two of our school kids and they were shot in the gang-related violence, I mean last year was a particularly a bad year for us as a school when it comes to violence from outside in the area (Principal Western Cape).*

Another teacher from Limpopo said: "We have a problem with our community....not the school....there are gangs of boys and girls around that are involved in drugs." The problem of outside gangs affecting the school was also mentioned by one of the security guards in Limpopo. He mentioned that "learners from other school do come and gang outside the gate" in order to disrupt and fight other learners from his school for one reason or the other. This problem brings violence in the school and at times teachers do not know the reasons for the fights:

*... if you check some [fights] are from the same areas not something that relate to school and it has nothing to do with school issues (Disciplinary Teacher Limpopo).*

Gangster activities in the area were also confirmed by the learners in the Western Cape.

*Many learners in our school are in gangsterism in the community and now there is violence in the community and the gangs are fighting with each other and then the learners can't come to school because they are going to get hurt because the school is near the American's gang so they will have to pass there to get to school, so they will get hurt. And then also some learners that are gangsters come to school and we as learners we don't know what's gonna happen because he is class and he is a gangster and that other gang is going to come and hurt him while I am in the class because we are in fear and we don't now what's going to happen because they come any time and hurt him.*

The problem of adequate security was also noted in the school of the Western Cape:

*There is no fence in the school so they come in and look for the gangsters, we can't come to school in the morning because they are shooting (Learner Western Cape).*

Similarly responses from Limpopo suggested that there are learners who form "crews". A learner from a Limpopo school said,

*"this crew that me and my friend were fighting with so I had to go to Disciplinary Committee....when we arrived there the crew that we were fighting with started telling the teachers all the things we did and all that stuff and the teachers didn't want to tell them what they did [was wrong because] ... on that crew there were two learners which their parents were teaching here so they didn't give us that chance and I think it took us about two weeks trying to solve this thing only to find out they were pointing fingers at us (Learner Limpopo).*

Cliques form and fights start as learners feel that they need to protect themselves or have to fight what they perceive as favouritism.

Threats, intimidation and harassment engender fear, and result in the absenteeism of both educators and learners (Segoe and Mokgosi 2006: 5). In 2003 the Western Cape Education Department reported that not only does violence have a serious impact on learning, but educators are often absent because they need time off for trauma counseling and debriefing. According to a procedural manual for managing safety and security within WCED institutions, activities outside the school can often have a disruptive influence on what happens inside the school in a variety of ways (WCED 2003). De Wet (2003: 93) points out that gang violence is therefore both an internal and an external problem.

### **Gang-related Policies in Reducing Violence?**

Lal (1996: 27) observes that since gang activity has become prevalent at many schools, school districts must implement policies to regulate the behaviour of gang members. Moreover, school administrators should develop site-specific, gang-related policies that are aligned with district policies, the school's philosophy and general policies. It was also suggested that gang-related policies should appear in a specially allocated section of the students' handbook, and this section should be displayed in all campus offices as well as all classrooms. However, it seems that all the best-developed policies in the world are worthless if incidents of violence are not reported to those who could make a change. Implementation of policies is more critical than just having rules. The findings of the research reported here suggest,

Teachers go to their classes and our headmaster is doing his job properly and the deputy. So most of the time, during school hours, our learners are in class unless those who are moving around maybe going somewhere maybe if you have sent them somewhere to go and fetch something for you but all in all they stay in class and teachers go to classes (Teacher NWP).

*.....a code of conduct for learners and for teachers also...it is working somehow but for other learners it is not working because even if there are laws saying no vulgar language, no late coming, no fighting...they still fight but some they know that they should abide by the code of conduct (Teacher NWP).*

The responses above suggest that schools do not just wait for the government to do something, but schools make attempts to prevent violence. Schools set up committees that look at issues of violence prevention. Representation in such committees is formed in a democratic manner. These committees include mainly parents, with a few teachers and learners. One principal said,

*We were told [by the department of education] that we should not venture into making this safety and security committee to be ... teacher-orientated and be driven by teachers, because it might lose the buy-in from the parents. We want parents to be the driving force (Principal KZN).*

Such schools go beyond just utilising parents in dealing with violence. They open chan-

nels of communication with school-based stakeholders. For example, one principal said:

*... we've got a representative council of learners ... So we have a very open line of communication ... if a learner is bullied, is victimised in whatever way, he has got an option of reporting that to class representatives or go direct, if he does have confidence, ... go direct to the class teacher. Of course, we'll help with that and also will take it at least to Deputy Principal ... or even the Headmaster ... (Principal KZN).*

In the same school the principal also mentions a social worker, the churches, police and Community Policing Forum as some of the structures that help schools. He states:

*We have engaged the services of the social workers ... this social worker deals with all these issues [of violence] because she is qualified ... she comes to school four times a week. It's Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, so that these matters can be taken care of in a very professional way ... Sometimes sporadically we just invite the SAPS to come and do the search without informing them prior to the officers coming because we enjoy a very healthy relationship with police ... when we invite people from outside like the CPF and they [learners] know these guys and they know how aggressive they can be ... Now they toe the line. They change completely (Principal KZN).*

In South Africa, many preventive measures were introduced into schools. It was suggested that a police presence in the school area would prevent troubling situations from escalating, and that police officers can be "adopted" through the Adopt-a-cop program for the school (Segoe and Mokgosi 2006: 5). However, many South African schools will not report incidents because of a fear of victimization. What is rather upsetting is that, according to Kodluboy (2004), school systems are prone to ambivalence about an outright denial of gang presence or the significance of a gang presence in schools. Thompkins (2000: 7) points out that the learners believe that if they retaliate against an act of aggression that is committed by one gang member, they will have to deal with the entire gang; therefore they refuse to report gang activities at their schools.

According to research that was conducted on the perceptions of educators regarding the course and the scope of violence in the province, the

presence of gangs in schools and in the townships increases the incidence of victimization of non-gang members (De Wet 2003: 93). The results of this study showed that learners and educators are fearful, not only at school, but also on their way to school and back home. They are afraid, not without reason, that they will be attacked by gang members.

## CONCLUSION

This paper reports on a study that investigated school stakeholders' experiences of violence in schools, the types of violence occur in schools, the reasons why violence occur in schools and the measures and initiatives taken by schools to prevent violence there. Findings suggest that poor management and organisation of the schools are the main causes of violence in schools. In particular, lack of adequate security of the school serves as inroads of violence in schools. In a nutshell, gangsterism is regarded as the main cause of violence in South African schools.

School-based violence through gangsterism specifically, manifest itself through school dropout and a reluctance to attend school, an increased risk of teenage pregnancy, the transmission of HIV/Aids amongst youth, community disintegration, and academic underperformance. It is also true that exposure to such violence could result in serious long-standing physical, emotional and psychological implications for both teachers and learners, including: distress; reduced self-esteem; risk of depression and suicide; reduced school attendance; impaired concentration; fear; and a diminished ability to learn. Furthermore, crime and violence are severe threats to the fragile democracy, peace, and economic stability in South Africa. It corrupts the social fabric of communities and the nation as a whole and endangers the health of both children and adults. It disrupts the provision of basic services and destroys respect for human rights. Violence further deepens gender and social inequalities and reduces the overall quality of life.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that there is need to support current efforts aimed at increasing basic levels of good management, school effective-

ness and teacher professionalism in South African schools. A well-ordered school is also a less violent school. Schools that experience problems of 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. The nature and causes of violence in society and in schools need to be examined and discussed in schools and teacher education including society forums. Further, the social nature of masculinity, and alternatives to aggressive and violent masculinity, needs to be examined and discussed in schools and in teacher education. Race and racism also need to be examined and discussed in schools and teacher education.

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