

## Exploring the Forms and Underlying Causes of School-based Violence: Implications for School Safety and Security

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**ABSTRACT** Widespread violence and ineffective disciplinary practices have become perennial problems in South African schools. The reasons for the upsurge in school-based violence may be attributed to numerous social ills, such as gender discrimination, gang-related activities, and drug and alcohol abuse. Research reveals that in many cases children are perpetrators of violence, with both, students and teachers becoming victims. The use of weaponry, sexual harassment and bullying to resolve conflict constitute an infringement on teachers' and students' bodily and psychological integrity and therefore, a serious infringement on their rights to security. School violence undoubtedly places students and teachers in constant fear, and retards the educational process. Using secondary data, this paper examines the different forms and causes of school-based violence, and its implications for school safety and security. It is in the best interest that schools create order, lawfulness and protection by applying the zero tolerance approach to serious learner misconduct.

### INTRODUCTION

The safety of students and teachers has in recent years become a matter of national concern as incidents of school-based violence are increasingly reported (Akiba et al. 2002; Human Rights Commission 2008). School environments have traditionally been viewed as a haven for children, protecting them from predators, the cruelty, and the violence of the outside world (Bonilla 2000). School-based violence and ineffective disciplinary practices have, however, become perennial problems in South African schools and continue to place students and teachers in constant fear and retards the educational process (Adams 2000). It therefore becomes imperative for the education authorities, parents and broader society to work closely together to fight the onslaught of pandemic violence and crime in schools.

The different forms of violence have shifted from cases of bullying to more serious forms of persecution that involve aggression (Leach and Mitchell 2006; Mncube et al. 2012). Some examples that are cited in the School-based Violence Report (South African Council of Educators [SACE] 2011) include the stabbing to death of a grade nine student with a pair of scissors; the axe killing of an eight-year old boy by two school peers; the stabbing to death of a grade 11 student at a house party; and the repeated violence in the form of bullying, assaults and rapes on schools' grounds. These are but a few forms of school-based violence that are frequently taking place in schools.

In a study by Fishbaugh et al. (2003:19), it was found that teachers and students feared for their own safety with the consequence that learning process was stymied by the need to deal with unruly behaviour and to prevent serious episodes of aggression and violence. Other studies (see Harber and Muthukrishna 2000) also show that the magnitude and effects of violence on teaching and learning is a national concern; this is even more worrying because school violence is escalating despite the measures that have been put in place by the Department of Education. The threat to school safety and security is not only the concern of schools but for all stakeholders. Education authorities, parents and the broader community are obliged to put measures in place to achieve school safety and security for teachers, students and non-teaching staff (Leinhardt and Willert 2002).

Although schools have become enmeshed in rules and regulations about the expected behaviours of teachers and students, schools are now, more than ever perceived as dangerous places. Schools should be transformed to places of safety as Ronald Stephens, Executive Director of the National School Safety Center, United States of America (in Van Jaarsveld et al. 2012:123) aptly states:

*No greater challenge exists today than creating safe schools or restoring schools to tranquil and safe places of learning. The challenge requires a major strategic commitment and involves placing school safety at the top of the educational agenda. Without safe schools,*

*teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn. A safe school is foundational to the success of the academic mission. A safe school is also one that is prepared to respond to the unthinkable crisis.*

School policies and rules are thus not enough to reduce the dangers that students can pose. It is essential that school policies, practices, and procedures have to be policed, enforced, and reviewed to ensure that schools are made safe and that the learning environment is not hostile (Potts and O'Donoghue 2007). Schools are obliged to investigate all cases of violence and to ensure that appropriate action is followed. This must be done rapidly as parents are entitled to claim damages (psychologically or physically) caused by violent-related incidents at schools (Knott and Stewart 2004).

In view of the above discussion, the main questions raised in this paper were:

- ♦ What forms of student-on-student violence are prevalent in South African schools?
- ♦ What are the underlying causes of school-based violence?

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study were:

- ♦ To investigate the forms of student-on-student violence are prevalent in South African schools.
- ♦ To examine the underlying causes of school-based violence?

### **METHODOLOGY**

A hermeneutic methodology was adopted because the researcher was interested, amongst others, in understanding the different forms and underlying causes of school-based violence, and interpreting human activity related to violence. The major social actors were teachers, students, parents, policy-makers and implementers at different levels, and the unit of analysis were teachers and student of both primary and secondary schools who are either perpetrators or victims of school violence. This method was primarily influenced by the central idea in hermeneutics that "the analyst must seek to bring out the meanings of a text from the perspective of its author" (Bryman 2004: 395).

The researcher conducted a literature review and analysed research findings obtained from

secondary data such as the Human Rights Watch (HRW) of 2001, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) Report of 2008, the Results of the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) 2008 and 2012 National School Violence Study (NSVS), and the South African Council of Educators (SACE) Report of 2011.

The Human Rights Watch of 2001 reflects on extensive investigative work undertaken in 2000 by the Human Rights Watch research staff in close partnership with human rights activists in South Africa. The National Schools Violence Study (NSVS) was carried out by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention in 2008 and in 2012. The main aim of the study was to collect data that was representative of schools across the country that could describe the extent of violence in South African schools. Types of violence that were the focus in this study included – threats of violence, physical assaults, sexual assaults and robbery. The 2008 Report on School-based Violence commissioned by the SAHRC is the result of public hearings on school-based Violence in the Western Cape Province. The objectives of these hearings were to explore the nature, extent and impact of school-based violence on the students' right to basic education. The SACE report entitled "School-Based Violence" was published in 2011 and provides amongst others, a holistic understanding of the nature and causes of school-based violence in South Africa and explores the impact of school-based violence on students and teachers, as well the culture of learning and teaching.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Understanding the Meaning of School-Based Violence**

According to Harber (2001), violence is derived from the Latin root *vio*, which refers to physical force used to inflict injury or damage. The *World Report on Violence and Health* defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual that results or is likely to result in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation (Krug et al. 2002:5). The UNCRC recognises the complexities of violence against children, and defines violence against children as all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploita-

tion, including sexual abuse (Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights 1989).

School-based violence occurs inside and outside the school premises. School-based violence is thus the intentional use of physical force between students, or between teachers and students. This can be threatened or actual, aimed against others, a group or community. In addition, violence can result in or likely result in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation. Most forms of violence are considered as deviant acts, which question collective norms and expectations, break the laws of society, and are punishable by formal sanctions (Ferrante 2003:215). School violence also includes acts that result in emotional harm and hurting others' feelings such as verbal harassment and verbal threats (Blaya 2003).

Violence in schools is not simply violence in the form of bullying; it has escalated into serious levels resulting in fatalities. School-based violence encompasses aspects such as teacher-student assault, student-on-student attacks and teacher-student attacks. The cause of the upsurge in school-based violence is attributed to numerous social ills that filter into school premises, including gender discrimination, gang-related activities, drug and alcohol abuse, racism and recurring patterns of violence in the homes of students. These factors result *inter alia* in high student absentee rate, high truancy rate, school dropouts, and increased incidents of student suicides, academic under performance, and a deterioration of the teaching and learning environment (SAHRC 2008). The opposite also holds true. Ward (in SACE 2011) argues that students who perform poorly, who drop out of school, who have low standards in terms of educational achievement and who change schools frequently are more likely to take part in violent behaviour.

Russo et al. (2007) assert that school safety is a high priority throughout the world and that violence should be abated or eliminated to ensure its maintenance. Ward (in SACE 2011) is of the opinion that the high levels of violence and crime taking place within South African schools has serious emotional and psychological consequences and is depriving students the opportunity of reaching their optimal academic and educational potential. Schools should consider applying stringent measures such as the zero tolerance approach. The concept 'zero tolerance' is a

concept borrowed from the United States legislation and refers to consistently enforced suspension and expulsion policies in response to weapons, drugs and violent acts in a school setting. This approach encapsulates mandated predetermined, typically harsh consequences or punishments (such as suspension and expulsion) for a wide degree of school policy violations. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (2001), zero tolerance policies address drug, weapons, violence, smoking and school disruption in efforts to protect all teachers' and students' safety, and maintain a school environment that is conducive to learning. School Management Teams (SMTs) and teachers favour zero tolerance policies because they remove difficult students from school; SMTs perceive zero tolerance policies as fast-acting interventions that send a clear, consistent message that certain behaviours are not acceptable in the school. However, to apply the zero tolerance approach in a South African context the underlying causes of school-based violence should be seriously considered.

Violence come from different sources, takes on many forms and involves different role players. For example, bullying was perpetuated inside and outside the school: students constantly bullying each other, teachers bullying students, students bullying teachers, and parents bullying teachers. Some examples of school-based violence that the researcher observed and dealt with during his tenure as principal of both, primary and secondary schools include:

- ♦ *Bullying*: Bullies usually influenced their peers to become involved in bullying as active participants, mainly due to peer pressure. Victims were known to enlist the help of their elder brothers or friends who are were not usually students in these schools to seek revenge for bullying. Bullying was also not confined to boys. Girl to girl bullying was on the increase and were mostly verbal, based on sexual insults and about competition for boys.
- ♦ *Gangsterism*: Gang violence involving theft, drugs, and weapons extended from the surrounding community and streets into the schools where students were seen as easy prey. This usually took place on the way to and from school and inside the school premises as well when gang members entered schools to sell drugs or extorted money.

- ♦ *Sexual harassment*: One of the main causes of sexual harassment is that traditional gender stereotypes and unequal power relationships within the broader society is not challenged but rather reproduced by students.
- ♦ *Teacher on learner violence*: Corporal punishment as a form of violence was perpetrated by teachers on learners. Even though corporal punishment was legally abolished in South African schools, this appeared to be a common form of violence that was frequently applied by many teachers.
- ♦ Some teachers sexually harassed girl students by inappropriately touching them on their buttocks and breasts.

In the ensuing discussion the Human Rights Watch of 2001, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) Report of 2008, the Results of the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention 2008, the 2012 National School Violence Study (NSVS), and the South African Council of Educators (SACE) Report of 2011 is critically analysed to determine the various forms of violence and the underlying causes thereof.

### **Forms of School-based Violence**

In this section we will only examine student-on student violence that is rampant in schools and these includes bullying, rape, murder, firing guns on the school grounds, carrying firearms and other dangerous weapons on the school terrain, as well as wounding or stabbing a fellow student (De Wet 2003).

### ***Weaponry as a Means of Resolving Conflicts***

Throughout the past several years, news of students carrying and using illegal weapons such as guns and knives, on school premises has dominated the national and international media. In the wake of the shootings and stabbings, school officials have been tightening up on security, stringently enforcing the students' code of conduct.

According to the SAHRC report (Burton 2008), students use physically aggressive methods such as using knives, weapons and handguns to resolve conflicts. No discussion of school violence could begin without making reference to the horrific events that unfolded in April, 1999 at Columbine High School in Colo-

rado, United States when two seemingly harmless students unleashed a barrage of bullets, killing 12 of their classmates and one teacher before turning the guns on themselves. Columbine was one of the bloodiest rampages on school grounds (Bonilla 2000). In South Africa, violence involving the use of weapons such as firearms, metal knuckles, throwing stars and knives in schools has received much public attention during the past few years. A student from a Technical School in the Gauteng Province, armed with a sword and dressed as a Ninja, killed a fellow-student and seriously injured three others on the school premises. In other similar cases, a 17-year old student was arrested and charged for attempted murder and possession of an unlicensed firearm after he fired shots at students in school (Sunday Times 2008) and a 19-year old Grade 10 student was found stabbed to death on the sport field of a Johannesburg school. Apparently he was attacked during an argument with a 14-year old Grade 8 student from the same school before the school started (Geldenhuys 2008).

Although it may be argued that these are isolated incidences taking place at some of the schools, the use of dangerous weapons is emerging as a serious problem in schools and needs to be eradicated. Strong measures should be put in place to prohibit students from carrying dangerous weapons within the parameters of the school premises.

### ***Bullying***

Bullying in South African schools has reached epidemic proportions during the past few years. It is one of the most common and well-known manifestation of school-based violence with far-reaching effects, not only for the victims of bullying, but also for the bullies. According to Coloso (2005), bullying is a conscious, wilful and deliberately hostile activity that can be verbal, physical, or relational – in which children get pleasure from another child's pain. Bullying is not about anger, or even about conflict. It is about contempt – a powerful feeling of dislike towards someone considered to be worthless or inferior, combined with a lack of empathy, compassion or shame. Bullying is premeditated, continuous, malicious and belittling tyranny. De Wet (2003), Garrett (2003) and Juvonen and Graham (2003) assert that bullying takes place when a

student is exposed repeatedly over a period of time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students. It includes physical aggression, verbal harassment and public humiliation. Bullying occurs across race, ethnic groups and income brackets and cannot merely be seen as teasing, playful, or a normal part of growing up.

Bullying may manifest in different forms such as verbal bullying like insulting, name calling, gossiping and threatening. Examples of physical bullying includes punching, strangling, kicking, tripping and violent assault, whereas rational bullying (non-verbal) takes the form of excluding or turning away when the victim approaches or being excluding the victim from a class party (SAHRC 2008; Olweus 1997). Emotional bullying, also referred to as psychological bullying, refers to terrorising, extorting, defaming, humiliating, blackmailing, peer pressure and ostracising. Cyber bullying is when victimisation takes place via telecommunication networks such as e-mails, short message systems (SMS) or picture messaging (Oosthuizen 2005).

Victims of bullying seldom expose bullies who infringe on their rights or who transgress regulations of the school. Although there are few reported court cases on bullying, it is widely reported in the media. It is thus imperative that bullying is be eradicated in schools.

### ***Gang-related Violence***

Gangs related activities within our schools are often linked to an increased level of school violence. Greater security measures have been put in place by education authorities in response to the problem, and while this may have a positive influence in some communities, they can also help to perpetuate a culture of fear that has been created by intense media coverage of such violence. Gangs usually emerge in areas of economic decline, where there may also be an absence of positive role models, community networks and stable families. Gang membership gives youth a sense of belonging and becomes a major source of identity for its members. In turn, gang membership affords youth a sense of power and control, and gang activities become an outlet for anger (Thompson 2000).

Gangsterism is rife in many schools and consequently students and teachers are exposed to gang violence. In Cape Town 50 students from two gangs fought a bloody battle over an al-

leged assault of a Grade 12 female student belonging to one of the gangs. The brawl between students of the two gangs involved using fists, sticks and broken desk planks on one another to resolve their issues (The Star 1999).

In a recent article "Gang-rape teen tells of her ordeal" (Naidoo and Pillay 2009:1), a 16 year old Grade 9 student bunked classes to attend a home party at which she claimed that she was dragged and raped at this party. The rape charge was withdrawn against seven boys (five attending school) in the magistrate's court on the basis that there was no "factual evidence of rape". The school should have had effective measures in place to curb students leaving the school premises. Providing a safe physical and emotional environment for students at school is one of the basic responsibilities of the Department of Education and its' employees (Oosthuizen 1998).

To eradicate the forms of violence experienced in South African schools, it is essential that we understand the underlying causes of school-based violence.

### **The Underlying Causes of School-based Violence**

Based on various studies the following have been identified as some of the underlying causes of school-based violence.

#### ***Individual Attributes***

Age, gender, attitude, mental health and substance abuse emerged as individual factors to increase the likelihood of being a victim or perpetrator of school violence. According to Keller and Tapasak (2004), the relationship between academic underachievement and antisocial behaviour of students, particularly aggression, has been a serious cause for school violence. In research conducted by Pahad and Graham (2012), it was found that school-based violence could be attributed to the biological and personal history factors that an individual brings to his or her behaviour. For example, age differentials between students were perceived by participants in the study as contributing to school violence because having students of various ages in one class often made it more difficult for teacher to exercise control in the classroom. There was also consensus that violence within the school context was most often perpetrated by males, and

that the attitude of students was not only a contributing factor towards student-on-student violence, but was also seen as a factor that contributed to student-on-teacher violence. Teachers were victimised by students through disrespect, rude behaviour, incomplete work or attributing blame for their problems to the teachers. Mental illness among students and a link between substance abuse and the perpetration of school violence against students and teachers were also raised as individual factors that contributed to school violence.

### *Gender Inequality*

From various studies, it was found that male students experienced violence differently from female students. Girl students tend to be the victims of sexual harassment, rape and sexual assault whereas boys tend to be physically assaulted and bullied. In most cases the violence is not a once-off event but rather continuous in threats. It would appear that the increase in reports of sexual harassment of female students lodged with the Department of Education and SACE indicate that the notion of gender equality is not being practiced at school level. There is an unequal relationship of power in male-female relationships in which boys tend to hold more power than girls.

Witt (in SACE 2011) contends that the family is the most significant institution in shaping the beliefs, attitudes and values of children, attitude and values, which tend to feed into socially based sex role stereotypes. Girls are required to be caring and sensitive, whereas boys are expected to be strong, brave and unemotional. It would appear that boys tend to replicate the aggressive and power-seeking nature of adult males. A Human Rights Watch study (2001) on sexual violence within South African schools found that girls were often the victims of sexual violence, abuse, rape, harassment and assault by teachers and male students. There is evidence that indicate that boys engage in physical fights, in and outside school.

### *Community Norms*

According to the SACE Report (2011), where degenerate community norms are prevalent, there are high levels of violence, easy access to drugs, alcohol and firearms, as well as high levels of

crimes which ultimately increase children's vulnerability and chances of becoming victims of violence. Research conducted by the National Schools Violence Study (Burton 2008; Burton and Leoschut 2012) found that students who had been exposed to high rates of violence and crime in their communities were more likely to have been the victim of any type of school-based violence than those children who had not been exposed to such high rates of violence.

Another characteristic of communities in which there are high levels of violence is the accessibility of alcohol, drugs (illegal or addictive substances) and weapons (Leoschut in SACE 2011). Those children whose family members used illegal drugs or had been incarcerated were twice more likely than other children to experience school-based violence. Research also indicates that there is a strong connection between substance abuse and crime (Burton 2008). It is becoming evident that there is an increasing availability of drugs and alcohol amongst school students. The SACE Report (2011) claims that not only students are the ones bringing these substances onto the school premises, but that some teachers are using children to get alcohol from *shebeens* (originally an illicit bar or club where alcoholic beverages were sold without a licence) or bunking classes to indulge in alcohol during school hours. The National Schools Violence Study (Burton 2008) found that 34.5 percent of secondary school children and 3.1 percent of primary school children knew students who had come to school drunk, and a similar percentage knew of fellow-students who had come to school high on drugs (Burton 2008). In keeping with the 2008 study, the 2012 National School Violence Study results again demonstrated a link between violence at schools and access to substances and weapons within the school grounds. Students were acutely aware of people at their school who were involved in various drug-related activities, ranging from the use of, to the purchasing and selling of, drugs. With regard to the use of substances, 47.1 percent – nearly half of the sample – reported personally knowing people at their school who smoked marijuana.

### *Interaction with Peers*

Negative peer-relationships contribute to the high level of school-based violence. Children who are brought up in violent communities tend

to interact and spend more time with delinquent, criminal or antisocial peers. Importantly, these friendships both increase their risk of being negatively influenced which results in violent activities committed by themselves as well as their chance of having violence committed against them (SACE 2011). The National School Violence Study (2008) supports this claim, since those children who had friends involved in antisocial behaviour (drug-related or criminal) were more likely to report the experience of violence against them than their peers who spent time with more conventional friends.

### ***Family Crime and Violence***

The SACE report (2011) asserts that student exposure to crime and violence within the family context also increases their risk of exposure to school-based violence. It has been found that those children who had been exposed to some form of interpersonal violence between family members (beating, punching, hitting, attacking with a weapon or intentionally hurting) were 2.4 times more likely than other children to be victimised within the school context.

Besides, the experience of violence having family members who were involved in criminal activities or who had been incarcerated also increased the risk of exposure to school-based violence. Studies show that there is a strong link between family violence and school-based violence.

### ***High Risk Zones***

The physical environment plays a fundamental role in maintaining safety and security at a school. Features within the physical environment can influence the chances of crime taking place. If a school is well-maintained and has a safe and secure physical environment, it would be more difficult for threatening incidents to occur. The SACE Report (2011) found that there are certain areas in schools that increase students' vulnerability of being victims of violence. The findings of the National Schools Violence Study (Burton and Leoschut 2012) indicated that the toilets were high-risk zones. Though not the most frequently reported site for violence, toilets still emerged as areas where crimes tended to occur, specifically in the case of sexual violence, with more than a tenth (12.5%) of the sex-

ual assaults reported to have happened in school toilets. Other crimes, such as assault (5.5%) and threats of violence (4.1%) were also said to occur in toilets, albeit to a much lesser degree.

Classroom in both primary and secondary schools are also where most incidents of violence transpire. According to students, teachers tend to leave classes unsupervised for the majority of the lesson time in turn thus creating a large opportunity for violence to occur. Types of violence that tend to occur in the classroom include assaults and theft, whereas sexual violence and assault are more common in toilets. Open grounds and playing fields were also found to be high-risk zones (Burton 2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

Violence taking place within schools has become a complex phenomenon. The different forms of violence that South African students encounter at schools varies, ranging from mere bullying to more severe victimisation, such as assault, sexual assault (including rape), being threatened with violence, and robbery. In addition, new forms of violence affecting students, such as cyberbullying, are now emerging as a cause for concern. School violence affects not only the children who are directly victimised in these incidents but also those who witness it. This indirect victimisation contributes to an atmosphere of fear and insecurity at school, which inevitably interferes with learning, stunts academic performance and, ultimately, impacts negatively on the longer-term development of young people.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to reduce or eliminate school-based violence, the following are some recommendations that could be considered:

### **Importance of Implementing Legislation and a Code of Conduct for Students**

One way in which schools can tackle the scourge of violence is through the implementation of legislation, policies and regulations enacted by the Ministry of Education. These legal documents provide a framework for the actions of principals, teachers and all other stakeholders engaged in school education. The South African Schools Act provides for a governing body

of a public school must adopt and implement a code of conduct and a safety policy for students. In order to assist SGBs execute this important function, the Ministry of Education has prepared Guidelines for the Consideration of Governing Bodies in adopting and implementing a code of conduct for students.

A well-disciplined school is usually defined as one where rules, policies and procedures are followed, and where everyone realises the implications and consequences of breaking school rules. The code of conduct and safety policy aims at establishing a disciplined and purposeful environment to facilitate effective education and learning in schools. The code of conduct is essential for setting out expectations and standards for student behaviour, for putting the necessary rules and procedures in place for dealing with threats to safety and security, and for protecting students and staff against physical and psychological danger such as assault, bullying, sexual harassment and rape.

The code of conduct for students should be crafted in such a way that preventative measures are put in place. This policy should include also include a clear definition of school-based violence and specifically a reporting procedure. A confidential reporting system will encourage students to report if they are victimised or have witnessed any form of violence on the school premises. The school should send a strong message to every member involved in the school and the community that school violence is taken seriously and will not be tolerated.

#### **Zero-based Tolerance: A Solution to Deal with School-based Violence**

Although the Department of Education and schools have employed all the necessary means to prevent violence from occurring on school premises, yet violence in schools go unabated. Serious misconduct such as rape, physical assault, sexual harassment, violence gangsterism and other forms of violence, including drugs and alcohol abuse and theft, is a threat to the orderly school environment and, therefore, requires much sterner disciplinary measures than those misdemeanours that are of a less serious or trivial one. It is with a sense of cautiousness that I propose that school governors and management teams consider introducing a policy of zero tolerance.

The zero-tolerance school discipline approach is a method of sending a message that disruptive behaviours would not be tolerated and that offenders would be punished. Zero-tolerance means that a school will automatically apply punitive measures in cases of a variety of infractions and to some extent becomes a “one-size-fits-all” solution to all serious problems that schools confront. The disciplinary problems are often mirrored in the often-dramatic coverage by the media. A zero-tolerance approach advocates that sanctions reflected in the school’s code of conduct must be strictly adhered to, without any exceptions or concessions. The drastic disciplinary measures of zero-tolerance approach are in line with section 9 of the *South African Schools Act* which permits the governing body to suspend or recommend expulsion of a student from a school after a fair disciplinary hearing. This approach will undoubtedly create a safe educational environment for all.

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