

School Violence: Reimagining Schools as 'Safe Havens'

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ABSTRACT School violence is a reality and it is increasing at an alarming rate around the globe in the 21st century. The vast majority of schools have been transformed into battlegrounds in which the safety of learners is not guaranteed. Schools are supposed to be safe places where all learners have equal access to equal educational opportunities and are treated equally. This paper aims to investigate factors that contribute to schools being violent institutional role models. A qualitative inquiry was used in the study. Data were collected using individual interviews with school principals and focus-group interviews with learners. The study was conducted in two provinces in South Africa, namely, Gauteng and North West. Four schools in the two provinces were deliberately selected to participate in the study. This study found that when learners report cases of violence in the school, either their teachers or their school principal often dismiss them. The study also discovered that the school does not challenge unequal power relationships found in wider society but instead reproduces them. The study concludes by proposing strategies that could enhance safety in schools to allow for effective teaching and learning taking place.

INTRODUCTION

Various researchers across the world have reported on the phenomenon of violence in schools, and researchers in South Africa are no exception. Zulu et al. (2004) argue that some schools have become highly volatile and unpredictable places because violence has become part of everyday school life. Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) reiterate that violence and crime in South African schools are a critical problem. A national study conducted by Burton (2008) showed that 15.3% of learners were victimised at school during the twelve months leading up to the survey. The study also found that nearly a third (31.2%) of secondary learners indicated that it is easy to obtain a knife at school. Schools are no longer safe places where learning can be nurtured. Learners feel isolated, threatened and are at risk when in the school remises. An international survey conducted by Mullis et al. (2006) showed that 23% of South African learners felt safe while attending school. Countries such as the USA, Holland and Japan faced numerous challenges in ensuring school safety during the past two decades (Orr 2003). This shows that school violence is a global phenomenon. In addition Asbeh (2010) maintains that the vast majority of schools have been transformed into battlegrounds in which the safety of learners is not guaranteed

School violence is a multifaceted phenomenon and no single explanation is sufficient to understand why learners behave the way they do. Children's behaviour could be the result of what they have experienced at home or at school, or by what they have seen in the media. Flores (2005:82) argues that children's behaviours are the product of multiple interactions that take place in multiple settings. This is especially true of school violence; it takes place in different ways in a wide range of contexts. The complexity of the phenomenon of school violence makes it difficult to define the concept 'school violence'. Therefore, suggesting one single definition of school violence is very complex since this aspect of human behaviour has been studied from many different angles, each of which has focused on different parts. However, for the purpose of this paper, the following definition of school violence will be adopted:

School violence is a kind of behaviour that includes the general characteristics of violent behaviour, with the difference that the actors are kids and adolescents and that it takes place in primary and secondary schools: in places where they are together for several hours a day all year (Estévez et al. 2008).

Schools are supposed to be safe places where all learners have equal access to equal educational opportunities and they are treated equally. According to De Wet (2006), every child is entitled to a safe environment, and the school

is responsible for ensuring that safety. Manning and Butcher (2005) define a safe school as a place in which the school climate allows learners, teachers, administrators, parents and visitors to communicate with one another in a positive and non-threatening manner. Prinsloo (2005) defines a safe school as one that is free of danger and where possible harm is absent; a place in which non-educators, educators and learners may work, teach and learn without fear of ridicule, intimidation, harassment, humiliation or violence. Because children spend approximately half of their lives at school, schools can serve as the second most important socialising mechanism after the home. Schools are important environments in which children not only gain knowledge but also learn about themselves, how to behave and how to interact with other children (Burton 2008).

Media reports attest to school violence being a grave concern in South African schools. Recently, it was reported in the media (*Times* 2012) that Grade 1 learners battered a seven-year-old classmate so badly that he might never walk properly again. This is shocking news, as schools are supposed to be safe places. Learners are traumatised by experiences they gain at school.

In view of the above discussion, it is imperative to identify the aspects that motivate violent behaviour among learners at school and to indicate what can be done to make schools safe environments that are conducive to teaching and learning and that will enhance learners' social development. According to Harber (2010), schools are not helpless in the face of an onslaught of crime and violence. Something should and can be done with regard to violence at schools.

School Climate

The way learners perceive school will influence the way they feel about school. Therefore, situations in which learners find themselves at school will contribute significantly to the way in which they will behave and to effective teaching and learning. Peterson and Skiba (2000) define the school climate as a reflection of the positive or the negative feelings about the school environment, which may affect a variety of learning outcomes directly or indirectly. These feelings relate to how comfortable or uncomfortable

each learner feels about the school environment. The environment can include teacher-learner relationships, learner-peer relationships, order of discipline, support, fairness of rules, and learners' perception of the school climate in general. According to Cohen (2010), the school climate is based on patterns of people's experience of school life and it reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, leadership practices and organisational structures. Defour (2005) posits that the school climate involves the unwritten beliefs, values, and attitudes that are the foundation of interaction between teachers, learners and administrators. The school climate sets the parameters of acceptable behaviour among all school actors, and it assigns individual and institutional responsibility for school safety. If violence occurs at schools and it is not resolved, it can destroy the school culture and school climate, as well as diminish the protective influence of the school (Brynard and De Wet 2012). A positive school climate will enhance learning and teaching at school, as well as positive behaviour and attitude. Conversely, negative feelings such as fear, bullying and intolerance will affect learning and behaviour negatively.

Theories of Violent and Aggressive Behaviour in Human Beings

Different theories have been put forth in an attempt to explain the causes of violent and aggressive behaviour in schools. The researcher will briefly discuss the social learning theory and the ecological system theory in an attempt to provide an insight in school violence.

According to Bandura's social theory (1977), violence is transformed into a model of behaviour through learning from experience and practice. Bandura identified three conditions that influence the likelihood of modelling. Children are more likely to imitate a model when

- ♦ the model is a powerful figure
- ♦ the model is rewarded rather than punished for the behaviour
- ♦ the model shares similar characteristics with the child

Bandura (1977) considers that violent behaviour is learnt through observation and imitation of behaviours that occur in the immediate environment of the individual. For example, bullies may influence their peers to become involved in

bullying as active participants. However, by passively watching the bullying behaviour, other learners also reinforce bullying. According to this theory, the environment influences the future violent behaviour of individuals. This implies that school learners' experiences will determine the type of individuals they will become. For example, children who are exposed to violence at school will tend to model the violent behaviour at home and at school. Bandura (1977) argues that imitation of violent behaviour will depend on whether the model observed receives positive rewards or not. If the person received a benefit for being violent, the observer will probably imitate such behaviour; however, if the model is punished for his/her violent behaviour, the probability of imitation will decrease. Asbeh (2010) posits that school violence is a product of an educational and social environment climate that reinforces such behaviour. For instance, if the school does not have measures in place to deal with violence, learners will perceive violence as 'normal' behaviour.

Bronfenbrenner (1994) proposed the ecological system theory that can be used to explain the different levels of interaction between the child and the environment and to explain how these levels can lead to learners' violent behaviour. According to this theory, five systems can influence a child's development. These five systems are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystems. These systems are interrelated and they influence the child's development. The (1) *microsystem* includes all those activities, roles and interpersonal relations that the person experiences in his/her immediate environment; the (2) *mesosystem* makes reference to the interactions existing between the microsystem contexts, such as the communication between the family and the school; the (3) *exosystem* clusters the social environments in which the individual does not participate actively, but in which there are facts that might be affecting the nearer contexts, such as his/her parents' or siblings' groups of friends or the mass media; and the (4) *macrosystem* makes reference to the culture and the socio-historical moment in which the individual lives, and includes the ideology and values of that culture. This model therefore highlights the fact that, in order to understand the violent behaviour of an individual, it is necessary to consider both the *microviolence* prevalent in his/

her immediate contexts (family, school or working place) and the cultural and structural *macroviolence* in society. This model also suggests that the school can act as a model of violent behaviour among learners since it forms part of the systems that affect learners' behaviour. Therefore, schools remain important instrument in attempting to reduce violent behaviour among learners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher is located within an interpretive paradigm based on the theories of Neuman (2006) who argues that an interpretive researcher's goal is to develop an understanding of social life and to discover how people construct meaning in natural settings. The study employs a qualitative approach to produce descriptions and explanations of violent behaviour in schools and to explore what could be done to make school environments safe.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in the study to select the participants. The participants were selected based on their relevance to the topic under study (Babbie 2007) and on anecdotal evidence of incidences. This evidence was garnered from conversations held with critical friends (teachers, principals, and subject advisors). The study was conducted in two provinces, namely, Gauteng and North West, to gain knowledge of how learners experience or describe violence, and to collect their views of what can be done to make schools safe. Four schools were chosen based on the extent of violence prevalent at these schools, as per discussion with critical friends mentioned above.

Participants

For homogeneity purposes, the Life Orientation teacher selected learners who perpetrate violence and learners who are victims of violence. Learners were also given a chance to select participants for the study, as they know each other far better than the teacher does. Teachers can only choose according to the record of violence they have – unfortunately, in most instances, violence is not reported. If participants perceive each other as fundamentally similar, they

will spend less time explaining themselves to each other and more time discussing the issue at hand (De Vos et al. 2011). Lastly, school principals were interviewed to elicit their views on what can be done to make schools safe.

Research Instruments

Data were collected by forming focus groups with learners and conducting semi-structured interviews with principals. The researcher used focus group to gain diverse views from the members of the group. In this group, learners were allowed to speak freely about their thoughts and feelings about violence in their schools, and they were encouraged to give suggestions about what can be done to make schools safe (Krueger and Casey 2000). Two focus groups were formed in all of the four schools identified. This was done to avoid missing information or drawing premature conclusions (De Vos et al. 2011). District officials identified the participating schools based on frequent reports of violence at those schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted with the participants at different, agreed-upon times (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The interviews (individual and focus-groups) were conducted at places where participants felt comfortable, and these interviews lasted from one to two hours. Data were analysed qualitatively. This involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper into understanding the data, and interpreting the larger meaning of the data (Cresswell 2003). The process involves capturing and transcribing data, and then categorising the data thematically.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were observed in this study. Participants signed a letter to this effect. The researcher received a letter of permission from the Department of Education of both North West and Gauteng provinces. The participants' dignity, privacy and confidentiality were respected at all times.

FINDINGS

The following themes emerged during the analysis of the data, namely, bullying, fear,

school management response to violence, lack of tolerance among learners, and lack of security on school premises.

Bullying

The study revealed that bullying is a serious problem in schools. It is evident in personal conflict among learners, learners bullying teachers, learners bullying other learners, and teachers bullying learners.

Bullying among learners

Schools are supposed to nurture learning in a safe and caring environment; unfortunately, it is not the case at some schools. Learners indicated that their peers bullied them. Some of their comments on bullying are as follows:

Maybe before or after break or maybe at break because people, when they don't have money (the bullies), wait at the toilet and they beat you for your money and take your money (Gauteng learner).

If you do not want to give them what they want, they will beat (North West learner).

The above quotes indicate that learners are victims of bullying and that bullies sometimes use the bathrooms to target their victims. Bullies take possessions such as money from their victims during breaks, and they will beat their victims when they refuse to hand over their money.

Teacher-targeted Bullying

The study shows that not only learners are experiencing bullying, but also teachers, especially female teachers. Principals indicated that teacher-targeted bullying disrupts classrooms and that teachers are finding it hard to control their classrooms. The following is some of the principals' comments:

Female teachers are sometimes harassed by both boys and girls (North West principal).

One form of violence is disturbing the classroom, especially lady teachers are victims. Even girls as well, they are very rude... making it very difficult for teachers to manage the class. But with us male teachers they rarely do that (Gauteng principal).

The above quotes suggest that learners do bully female teachers. As a result, some of these

teachers cannot manage or control their classes. One could argue that this type of situation is not conducive to teaching and learning. Teachers are supposed to teach, but they can only do so if they are teaching in a safe environment.

Teachers Bullying Learners

Learners are entitled to a safe educational environment and the school has the responsibility to provide such safe environment. Learners have reported that their teachers verbally degrade them. The study revealed that teachers do bully learners. Learners' comments on teachers bullying them are as follows:

We are being abused emotionally and physically by that teacher who tells us that they are in place of our mother and father but still use abusive language when they talk to you (North West learner).

The first thing some teachers are being rude to you they don't talk to you nicely, they swear, they talk about your parents. So it's like when you do one mistake like making a noise, she won't say keep quiet normally she would say like wrong things like swear at you and use big words (swearing words). When you come to school you are excited because the teachers are going to teach you and treat you good ... Our teachers should stop swearing at us and teach us the morals, how to behave also in school. So that also make you feel it's important to listen to the teacher because the teachers are the ones that are making your future to be bright, so that's why I think teachers should treat us well (North West learner).

Teacher calls us by vulgar words (Gauteng learner).

We would like you to talk to teachers not to ill-treat us. That is why I bunk classes; I do not want to be ill-treated. I know that I am losing out but what can I do? (North West learner).

If you are a good person, they will say stupid things about you (Gauteng learner).

The above quotes suggest that teachers are verbally bullying learners. Teachers use derogatory terms when trying to correct 'wrong' learner behaviour. Teachers do not treat learners with the respect that they deserve. Teachers, who are expected to be role models, display the wrong attitude towards their learners, thus making learners react with violence. Learners feel that teachers should treat them with respect and

make them feel important. In addition, learners indicated that when they go to school, they also expect their teachers to teach them good behaviour and morals. Therefore, it is important that teachers play their part and act as good role models to learners. To avoid being ridiculed by their teachers, learners resort to staying away from classes. It is worth noting that learners are aware that bunking classes will result in them failing but they will do anything to avoid the negative treatment by their teachers. Learners cannot talk to their teachers without fear of being bullied.

Fear

The study shows that learners live in fear at their respective schools. They fear intimidation from fellow learners and even fear being attacked by other learners outside the school premises. This could make reporting violent acts at school difficult. The following quotes demonstrate the presence of fear among learners:

I think since I got in this school I'm always afraid to express myself like every time anyone tells me to do something I'm too scared to refuse because I am a soft person because every time somebody wants to touch me like when I say no they don't believe me because they know I'm too scared to report, sometimes I'm too scared to fight for myself (North West learner).

If you do not give them what they want, they tell you that they will wait for you after school. Sometimes I do not want to come to school because I do not want to be beaten or treated badly (Gauteng learner).

It is evident from the above quotes that the participants do not regard their schools as safe places. Attending school poses a threat to certain learners since they feel they are not protected within the school environment and even on their way back home.

Principals have confirmed this fear among learners. The following quotes capture principals' comments about fear among learners:

... you find that a bully will tell the other one that I'll wait for you outside and the victim will fear to come to school because there are bullies here. So you see performance won't be good because every time when she is at school she is afraid (Gauteng principal).

Some learners just stay at home and when you enquire, they will tell you that they did not

want to come to school because they were afraid so and so will beat them. You know learners end up failing because they do not attend school regularly due to fear (North West principal).

Principals indicated that bullies wait for their victims outside the school premises. This shows that violence in schools is often perpetrated outside the school premises. Principals explained that fear results in learners staying away from school. They indicated that absenteeism affects learner performance. Learning requires a relaxed and peaceful atmosphere and a sense of security for the learners to benefit from their learning experiences.

The results also show that learners bring dangerous weapon to school to protect themselves:

So there was this other time last year I fought with this guy and those guys I thought if I go straight with fists they will beat me up, so I went and got a steel and I beat him up with a steel (North West learner).

Yah, dangerous weapons. There is another one who took a bread knife from his parent's home and brought it to school saying he wanted to kill another guy and that poor boy, shame. He was so frightened (Gauteng learner).

Some learners use these weapons to threaten other learners, but in some instances, they bring weapons to school to defend or protect themselves against the bullies. It should be noted that once the learner brings dangerous weapons to school, these weapons could be used for defence or to attack other learners.

School Management Response to Violence

The results also indicated that violence in schools is perpetuated by those in power – in this instance, by school principals and teachers. Learners indicated that when they report violence to the principal and teachers, they are either ignored or dismissed, and no measures are taken to stop or to discipline the perpetrators. These following quotes capture learners' views:

We asked Madam to see the principal; she said the principal is busy with the parents and all those stuff. I then asked to see the deputy principal, but they kicked us out of the office and said he doesn't have time for us. I think that unless there is a fight, if I fight that guy, they will maybe take me serious (North West learner).

In this school, then I went to the principal and told what that guy did this she told me to sit down there, like how does that make me feel the person is chasing me with a knife then she tells me to sit down there, it's unfair (North West learner).

I was afraid to take the matter to the office because they don't take you seriously and they say ok, we are going to suspend the child for a week and... you see the very child coming to school and attending the classes in the suspension (North West learner).

The above quotes suggest that the school climate is not supportive of learners. It therefore renders the school unsafe for learners, as learners are ruled by fear and they have to cope with a lack of trust in those in power, for example, teachers and principals. Teachers and principals do not take the necessary steps to deal with perpetrators, and when learners do report cases of violence to them, they simply 'brush' it off. Learners do not see teachers as acting in their interest; there is no friendly relationship between learners and teachers. One learner said: *...if we report sexual harassment or violence, they should be serious about it, they should call the police and make an example of this one person and that will be an example to others.* This shows that learners believe that if school management will act on their reports of violence, or call the police to intervene, their schools may become safe. Learners feel that when they report cases of violent behaviour, those incidences must be taken seriously and the perpetrators must be punished. This will also ensure that learners have confidence in school leadership.

However, some learners also indicated that the police do not always offer protection to them. They indicated that principals would sometimes call the police who would then harass them without trying to understand or deal with the problem. Here is what one learner said:

The principal will call the police, and the police will beat you and harass you without asking you what happened (North West learner).

The above quote suggests that the police, when summoned to intervene at a school, harass the learners instead of trying to resolve the matter. The police are expected to protect the citizens of their country and learners are part of those citizens. However, the results of the study showed that they ill-treat learners.

It is interesting to note that principals indicated that they do act on reports of violence while learners felt that principals are not doing anything. The principals state:

... we call the parent, the parent comes here and intervenes and if the incidents is too much for us to handle, we call the police or we phone our 'adopt a cop' ...we've got a code of conduct for learners and for teachers also, it is working somehow but for other learners it is not working because if there are laws saying no vulgar language, no late coming, no fighting but they still fight but some they know that there should abide by the code of conduct (North West principal).

You know they will always bring them here in the office and then we will reprimand them once or twice and then they are ok

We immediately call the police. So that the police must intervene. They act fast and they come (Gauteng principal).

School principals indicated that there are measures in place to combat violent behaviour in their schools. They indicated that they sometimes call parents, reprimand the learners, and even call the police to intervene. The results suggest that learners feel that police intervention does not remedy the situation but in fact makes it worse due to harassment by police officials. Although learners felt that the principal and teachers do not care about them, principals indicated that they do care and that they show love to the learners. Here are the views of the principals regarding caring and respecting learners:

So far it is still a caring school, for instance, if from the staff if there is one that is sick, you know. We will always come together and get together and go and see the person at home or in hospital. Then if a person was for maybe a week or two not here in school then we assemble here in school to welcome back that person. That is to show that we care about one and other. This has been cascaded to the learners because usually our school is a valued citizen school (Gauteng principal).

... here in our school we've got different values like respect, we teach our learners to respect each other... also we teach them always to be honest and to be reliable and... also to be responsible so they can become better citizens (North West principal).

From the above quotes, it is clear that principals feel that they do instil moral values in learners, such as respect, in their quest of ensuring that learners become responsible citizens. However, learners do not share the same sentiments about respect and care for them. Learners feel isolated and that no one cares about them. One learner said: *... if we report sexual harassment or violence, they should be serious about it, they should call the police and make an example of that one person and that will be an example to others.* Learners felt that if decisive measures can be taken against learners who perpetrate violence, it would be a lesson to other learners.

Lack of Tolerance among Learners

The results showed that lack of tolerance among learners' results in them losing their temper and becoming involved in violent behaviour. The following quotes illustrate the lack of tolerance among learners.

She is saying that she ended up beating that person because that person was saying and harassing her and she ended up getting really angry and then she was forced to beat that person (Gauteng learner).

If it happens if they playing a game of tins and that person hit her badly with the ball, she is going to run after the person and hit her badly (North West learner).

During short breaks and if you happen to push somebody accidentally you will find that that person will go and tell the others or whoever is the elder at home and they will come and beat you up the next day (Gauteng learner).

I don't think the violence from the schools will stop, especially the physical one because I myself was a victim of violence and if somebody makes me a victim, then he will be my victim (North West learner).

The above quotes showed that learners turn to violence as a way of responding to the circumstances in which they find themselves. In addition, learners use violence as a way of communicating their feelings to other learners. Instead of solving their problems through communication, they resort to violent behaviour.

Lack of Security on the School Premises

Security is important, as a lack of security will affect learners' ability to concentrate and

learn. Learning requires a positive and safe environment in which learners will feel not just physically safe but also emotionally safe. The following quotes capture learners' views of security at their schools.

The learners, people from outside and if you want to go home early you just use those gaps, you want to go buy cigarettes you use those gaps, if you want to go buy food from outside, you use those gaps, if your boyfriends wants to come into the school yards, he uses those gaps (North West learner).

No type of security in this school, like some other guys bring their friends from their kasi's and come to rob the children in the school. We are not safe (North West learner).

Security, if we can have tight security, we will feel safe in the school. Like the security here, the reason that the knives enter the school is because of low security, if they could like close all the gaps and when you come into the school, you are searched, then we will be safe (North West learner).

The study showed that there is no tight or secure fencing around schools; the school fence often has holes in it. Lack of security at school puts learners at risk, as people from outside use the holes in the fence to access the school and rob learners of their belongings. However, learners also use these gaps to go in and out of the school, even during school hours. As learners may come and go as they please, it shows that there is little or no access control on school premises. Learners felt strongly that access to the school should be controlled to inhibit intruders from gaining access to the school and that the fence must therefore be repaired and maintained. They also indicated that if all learners can be searched before they enter the school, it might help in decreasing violence at schools and contribute to learners feeling safe on the school premises.

DISCUSSION

Violence at schools is a complex phenomenon that could be attributed to various factors. The study revealed that learners' overall perception of the school climate is negative, as schools are seen to reproduce violent behaviour that learners model in order to cope with victimisation occurring in schools. Because the school does not provide a supportive environ-

ment to learners, learners perceive the school as not safe. Although learners indicated that they bring weapons to school to protect themselves against the perpetrators of violence, this very act compromises the school as a safe place for learning and teaching. According to Defour (2005), as fear among learners increases, confidence in school administrators or other adults diminishes and informal social control against violence weakens. As a result, learners will resort to carrying weapons. Schools, where learners feel safe, foster high-quality relationships among learners and teachers, for instance, while decreasing the probability of violence (Loukas 2007).

The results also indicated that bullying is rife in schools. Both learners and teachers are guilty of bullying. De Wet (2006) defines bullying as intentional, hurtful acts, words or other behaviour, such as name-calling, threatening, or shunning, committed by an individual or individuals against another individual or individuals. De Wet (2006) adds that bullying is a worldwide problem that can have negative consequences for the general school climate and for the rights of learners and teachers to learn and to teach in a safe environment. One could argue that bullying compromises the quality of interpersonal relationships among learners and between learners and teachers. Teachers will no longer be regarded as beacons of hope and as role models. Prinsloo (2005) maintains that South African educators have an important duty to protect the learners who have been placed in their care, not only in terms of the Constitution and other legislation, but also in terms of their *in loco parentis* status. Prinsloo (2005) further argues that human dignity is a critical and extremely fragile component of the multifarious relationships making up the educational environment, especially because so many minors or otherwise vulnerable and defenceless people are involved.

The study also showed that those in power perpetrated violence directly and indirectly – directly when they themselves bully learners, and indirectly when not acting when violent behaviour is reported to them. Learners need to feel that they can trust and that they are supported by school teachers and the principal. According to the Code of Conduct of the South African Council of Educators (SACE 2011), teachers must take reasonable steps to ensure the safety of their learners. Teachers are sup-

posed to ensure that learners have an environment conducive to learning, which will promote teaching and learning. Jacobs et al. (2011) emphasised that teachers must have a positive work ethics, display appropriate values, and conduct themselves in a manner that benefits, enhances and develops the teaching profession. Learners might take the law into their own hands seeing that no one cares about what they are experiencing at school.

It is evident from the results that learners are modelling the behaviour they have witnessed at school. According to the Bandura theory, negative behaviour is modelled and imitated when not reprimanded. For example, teachers are bullying learners; learners are bullying their peers; and the police are bullying the learners whom they are supposed to protect. According to SACE (2011), learners, who are exposed to violence at school, tend to model violent behaviour. In some instances, learners display violent behaviour as a way of defending themselves against other bullies. Burton (2008) argues that schools are important environments in which children should not only gain knowledge but also learn about themselves, how to behave and how to interact with other learners. Therefore, if the environment does not support amicable relationships at school, it is possible that learners will model the wrong kind of behaviour.

The study also shows that learners and principals look at police intervention differently. Some principals have indicated that they have formed partnerships with the police and that they can summon the police at any time they may feel there is a need for it. However, some learners indicated that the presence of police officers is not helpful, as those very same police officers often harass them.

CONCLUSION

It is unfortunate that schools have been transformed into battlegrounds in which safety of learners cannot be guaranteed. School violence is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a variety of variables such as the school itself and the community at large. It is evident from the study that learners are modelling the behaviour they have seen at school, which means that the school can act as a violent institutional role model. The study also showed that factors such as fear among learners, bully-

ing, school management's indecisive actions regarding school violence, and a lack of security measures on school premises render schools unsafe. It is also true that teachers could act as role models by teaching learners good behaviour and morals and refraining from using abusive language as a way of disciplining learners. Treating learners with love and care could make learning meaningful to learners. It is imperative that schools strive to create a supportive climate that will give all learners a sense of safety and belonging. Learners can learn if they feel safe and protected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Learners need to feel safe in their school environment; therefore, it is imperative that school managers give priority to safety measures such as controlling access to the school premises and maintaining school fencing. It is believed that the general appearance of a school adds to the perception of safety, and that a well-cared-for school is less susceptible to vandalism and violence. Since learners tend to bring dangerous weapons to school, they should be searched when entering the school premises. The installation of monitoring devices such as video cameras could also assist the school in dealing with violence on school premises.

It is evident from the study that learners resort to violence as a means of communication and as a defence mechanism against bullies. It is important that learners be taught alternatives to violent behaviour when resolving their personal and interpersonal problems. This can be done in the Life Orientation classes. Building a safe school requires teaching non-violent and conflict-resolution skills to teachers, principals and learners. Workshops and counselling dealing with violence should be conducted for both teachers and learners to teach them how to deal with violence.

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