

Teacher Attitudes, Professionalism and Unprofessionalism in Relation to School Violence

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ABSTRACT In South Africa, teaching and learning are increasingly being undermined by a growing culture of violence in schools. Rethinking how we act as teachers at school will influence both ourselves and learners as transformation agents. Teachers are viewed as beacons of hope by the learners in their care. However, teachers' professional ethical disposition is constantly questioned owing to the violence in our schools. This article aims to investigate the impact of violence on teacher professionalism and how lack of professionalism is a factor in increasing school violence. Data were collected through document analysis, individual and focus group interviews. Participants selected were secondary school learners and principals. Four schools in the six provinces in South Africa were deliberately selected to participate in the study. This study found that teachers are perpetuating violence in schools by the use of derogatory comments, bullying, and verbal violence, all of which is targeted at the learners. In addition, the study revealed that teachers are sometimes victims of violence in schools. The study emphasised professional ethics during pre- and in-service teacher training. Furthermore, the study recommends that in-service training and on-going support be given to both teachers and learners to enable them to deal with violence.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

School violence is a reality and, in the 21st century, is increasing at an alarming rate around the globe. South Africa is not exempt from this form of violence. According to Burton (2008), violence in schools across South Africa has become commonplace and is likely to impact negatively on children in a number of ways. This point is emphasised by Zulu et al. (2004). In short, school violence is a reality and, in certain areas, is on the increase. The purpose of any school is to ensure that effective teaching and learning takes place and therefore that children's right to education is respected. Schools are supposed to be safe places where effective teaching and learning can take place in an environment that is safe for learners, teachers and support staff. However, Zulu et al. (2004) argue that schools have become highly volatile and unpredictable places in that violence has become part of everyday school life.

Violence in school often results in low learner achievement. When learners do not achieve, the blame is usually placed on the teachers. Bester and Du Plessis (2010) contend that South African teachers are battling to cope with increasing demands for learner performance in the midst of an inherent culture of violence and intimidation that spills over onto the classrooms. Teachers no longer have control over their learn-

ers and this situation impacts negatively on the culture of teaching and learning.

Burton (2008) argues that violence in any form runs counter to the common moral and value code within any society. Violence is perceived as a real threat to every value that modern society espouses. These include peace, individualism, emotional wellbeing, stability and equality. Violence also poses a threat to development, equality and economic growth.

Emanating from this huge challenge of violence in schools, Prinsloo (2005:6) maintains that South African teachers have an important duty to protect the safety of the learners who are placed in their care, not only in terms of the Constitution and other legislation, but also in terms of their *in loco parentis* status. Furthermore, teachers' *in loco parentis* status forces the school to foresee the potential dangers to which learners may be exposed at school and to act proactively by taking steps in the form of implementing safety measures or policies.

Society suffers from a number of social ills such as crime, violence and poverty and, indeed, given these ills the pressure is on teachers to ensure that they produce responsible citizens. Teachers are viewed by many as beacons of hope. Society hopes that teachers can show learners that their lives and futures can be different. However, this seems to be a distant dream as teachers today, are not up to that task.

Over the past few years, a certain amount of research has been conducted on the phenomenon of violence in South African schools, (See, for example, Mokhele 2006; Du Plessis 2008; Prinsloo 2005; Le Roux and Mokhele 2011; Ngakane et al. 2012). However, little has been done to investigate the impact of violence on teacher professionalism. Teachers and learners are expected to respect each other and work together. However, working together is not a simple matter, given that teachers have professional responsibilities and learners have responsibilities and rights. Du Plessis (2008) indicates that not nearly enough attention has been paid to the effect of high levels of violence on teachers and how they are expected to cope with such violence. Du Plessis (2008) further argues that there is an obvious gap in the literature on the issue of school violence and teachers' experiences of school violence. How teachers experience their teaching endeavours will impact directly on their profession. Violence in schools also makes it impossible if not difficult for teachers to teach.

Overview of Legislation Governing Teachers' and Learners' Conduct

Legislation in the form of the South African Constitution (108 of 1996), Employment of Educators Act (76 of 1998) and South African Schools Act (SASA) (84 of 1996) protects the rights of children. The use of corporal punishment in schools is prohibited by section 10 of the SASA. Teachers' social responsibilities are embodied in the SASA. In addition, teachers are guided by 'Code of Professional Ethics' of the South African Council for Educators (SACE). SACE is a professional council that is established in terms of the SACE Act (31 of 2000). SACE aims to enhance the status of the teaching profession, and to promote the development of teachers and their professional conduct. The SACE Act mandates the following in terms of teachers' professional conduct: it states that the teacher shall:

- (i) Promote, develop and maintain the image of the profession.
- (ii) Behave in a way that enhances the dignity and status of the teaching profession and that does not bring the profession into disrepute.
- (iii) Keep abreast of educational trends and developments.

- (iv) Promote the on-going development of teaching as a profession.
- (v) Accept that he or she has a professional obligation towards the education and induction into the profession of new members of the teaching profession.

An infraction of these obligations renders a teacher liable to expulsion from the profession. In addition to the legislation that governs schools in South Africa, each school is expected to have a code of conduct and school safety policy. These policies should be drawn up by the school governing body. It is important that learners be involved in the formulation of school policies so that they view them as their own and not as something imposed on them. These policies should be visible in all schools; in other words, school rules and warnings should be displayed in places where learners can see them. In some instances, learners may also have the rules explained to them in assembly or classroom to ensure that they understand the purpose of the rules, the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and the consequences of infractions. This will ensure that the school's code of conduct and the school's safety policy are institutionalised. Institutionalisation of these policies demonstrates a commitment to violence prevention and helps staff and students feel safe. To reiterate: the code should clearly explain school rules and punishments for infractions.

Prinsloo (2005) argues that, to change the situation in South Africa schools, every teacher should be committed to professional and ethical conduct, to the acceptance of accountability as a way of protecting learners' rights, and to ensuring a safe school environment. Teachers have a legal obligation to protect learners' rights in the school environment. Prinsloo (2005) states that:

Teachers have a duty to uphold, protect and promote the rights of learners to effective education, equal educational opportunities, human dignity, and privacy and for just administrative justice to ensure a safe school environment.

School Leadership

School leadership is of the outmost importance in South African schools. School heads or principals need to play a crucial role in ensuring that the school is effective and that the school is safe. It is worth stating here that the ethos of

a school can contribute to a context where violence is more or less likely or possible. The more disorganised, unreliable and inconsistent the school is, the more chance of violence; simply because, in such a *laissez-faire* atmosphere, learners tend to feel that anything goes and they too can do as they please. Botha (2004) argues that effective leadership is essential for an effective school. He adds that principalship is of the utmost importance and principals often have to play a key role in the effective and efficient functioning of schools. It is important for schools to institute zero tolerance provisions for other types of offences, such as assaulting a teacher, so that violent students are quickly removed from normal classrooms. Bearing in mind that some disruptive students might welcome expulsion, the school policy should assert that certain acts will result in prosecution.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researchers adopted a qualitative research approach to facilitate entry into the participants' life-world and to explore their life experiences. Yates (2004) points out that qualitative research is concerned with the perspectives of participants. The main focus of this study is to investigate the dynamics of violence in South African schools.

Population

This research was conducted in six provinces in South Africa, thus increasing the extent to which the results can be generalised. These provinces are: North West, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. The participants were chosen from specific target group whose opinions and ideas were of interest to the researchers. Research participants included four principals from secondary schools in these provinces and the learners themselves.

Sampling

The study was based on purposive sampling. Punch (2005) defines purposive sampling as sampling in a deliberate way, with some purpose (hence the name) or focus in mind. The

researchers purposefully selected participants that best helped them to understand the project and the research questions. Researchers were given the names of schools that are prone to violence (this information was supplied by district officials). Learners were selected as participants because they had certain characteristics in common. They were chosen because they were either violent or had been the victims of violence. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences, their point of view, and their concerns regarding violence in their schools. Both rural and urban schools were used in the research. The reason for including both urban and rural schools was to ensure that teachers, principals and school governing bodies were equally represented in the study, irrespective of their geographical location.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected from learners, teachers, school governing bodies, and school principals. The intention was to obtain diverse views on these people's experiences of violence and the nature of the violence in their schools. These data sources provided the researchers with an opportunity to examine how violence in schools is dealt with and how it is experienced by different individuals. To this end, the researchers conducted individual interviews and focus groups interviews. In the case of teachers and principals, we used more flexible, semi-structures interviews in order to obtain a detailed picture of the nature of violence in their schools and how they deal with this violence. Rossouw (2005) points out that interview are worth conducting because the researcher can follow up and clarify information immediately.

Focus groups are a way of better understanding how people feel or think about an issue, product or service (De Vos et al. 2011). They add that focus groups encourage self-disclosure among participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior preparations were made to ensure that the venue and times of interviews and focus group discussions were convenient. This was done to ensure that classroom disruption was minimised. In addition to this, we had some brief chats with the learners before the focus group

discussion itself. Here we followed De Vos et al.'s advice (2011): these chats help to create a warm and friendly environment and they put participants at ease.

The primary data of qualitative interviews are verbatim accounts of what transpires in the interview sessions, which is why we used a tape recorder. Neuman (2006) states that recording the interview sessions ensure that the verbal interactions are captured completely and also provides material that can be used in any subsequent reliability checks. In this case, to enhance the validity of the qualitative data, the researchers used member checking. Member checking refers to providing feedback to participants about preliminary findings and interpretations and securing participants' reactions (Schumacher and McMillan 2001). In this case, this was done to share the emerging themes with the participants and to elicit their comments on whether the themes accurately reflected their experiences. Participants who had been interviewed were asked to review a synthesis of the data obtained from them, and were asked to modify any information or interpretation of the interview data.

Data Analysis

Document Analysis

The various policy documents were analysed and critically reviewed. These documents included: the South African Constitution, the South African Schools Act, and the South African Council of Educators Act. These documents helped the researchers to gain insight on the policy frameworks governing teachers' ethics and learners' rights in South African public schools.

Interview and focus group data

Recorded data were transcribed for close analysis. Data from the interviews were coded and categorised into themes. Miles and Huberman (1994) Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis (The Flow Model) was used. This involves data reduction and displaying and drawing conclusions and verification done.

Ethical Considerations

This research obviously included ethical issues that had to be taken into consideration. Participants signed a consent form that confirmed their willingness to participate in inter-

views and focus groups. Participation was voluntary, which meant that participants were free to withdraw from the study for any reason and at any time. Participants were assured that their responses would be treated in confidence. We also asked participants' permission to record the interviews. The purpose of the study was explained to all participants and learners were given consent forms to give to their parents or caregivers to sign. Principals and teachers also signed the consent forms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis was divided into two parts. The first part focused on how violence can impact on teacher professionalism and the other part on how lack of teacher professionalism is a factor in increasing violence. The following themes emerged during the data analysis: teachers as victims of bullying and teachers as role models.

Teachers as Victims of Bullying

It is worth mentioning, however, that bullying is not only learner-to-learner bullying. In this study it became apparent that teachers are also victims of bullying.

Teachers are afraid of bully learners. (SGB member Mpumalanga)

Female teachers are sometimes harassed by both boys and girls.

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. (Teacher KZN)

It is evident from the above quotes that female teachers are the victims of learner bullying and this obviously hampers the teaching and learning process. Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) state:

Teachers who experience risk and violence at school where they teach are likely to change schools, which in turn has a negative impact on teaching continuity. They are frequently absent from school, go to class unprepared, lack motivation, seek early retirement, or leave the already under-resourced profession entirely.

The above quote suggests that teachers constantly face a situation where they do not feel safe from the threat of violence. This result in stress and depression among teachers and many

decide to resign from the profession. Teachers are supposed to enjoy and be passionate about their work. Lack of such passion will result in a feeling of being alone in the education system and feeling that they have no support from either the Department of Education or the school management. Du Plessis (2008) mentions that teachers are seen as suffering, disabled victims of violence, working in an unsupportive system. To reiterate: schools are no longer safe places for either learners or teachers.

Relationships between learners and the teachers have, in some instances, deteriorated to such an extent that learners also fight, either physically or verbally, with their teachers. This unfortunate and embarrassing state of affairs even leads to learners physically attacking their teachers when they (that is, the learners) are reprimanded.

One learner in Limpopo commented that, “violent things in schools...don’t happen with other learners [only] ...they also do it with teachers”. Another participant added that where violence involved a learner and a teacher, the learner, despite knowing the prescriptions of the school policy, will do whatever he or she pleases.

Would like slap a teacher because she...the policy of the school says no phones and no gadgets are allowed and you come with the phone they take it you will get it at the end of the year that’s the policy of the school so you come with a phone and you just expect them to look at you and say that is fine, no they are going to take it and when she tries to take it away from you, you slap her. (Learner, Mpumalanga)

Another learner said,

Yes it happened and it was not so long ago about 3 weeks ago, and this other kid she was verbally attacking with the teacher because instead of slapping me I got down and he [missed and] slapped you accidentally and he [teacher] said sorry but you [learner] didn’t take it and you started saying hey you [teacher’s name] are taking out your stresses on me. (Learner, Limpopo)

The above quotations suggest that teachers are often attacked by learners they try to discipline.

Teachers as Role Models

The results indicate that it is difficult for teachers to discipline learners because they

themselves do not display behaviour that learners can emulate. Teachers are expected to be exemplary. The results indicate that teachers are not living up to this standard.

Teachers are often not free to discipline learners as they are also part of the problem. (Teacher, Gauteng)

Some teachers send learners to go and buy cigarettes during school hours. (Teacher, Gauteng)

Teachers come late to school. (Teacher, Gauteng)

Teachers are not proving to be good role models to the learners they teach. Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) indicate that teachers have to understand that, to their learners, they are significant role models, which is why their conduct should always be exemplary. To return to one of the quotations above, how will learners learn good behaviour and avoid the risk of substance abuse if their teachers send them out to buy cigarettes? The teacher acts as a model and, in most instances, learners imitate their teacher’s behaviour. Teachers are expected to act as role models for learners who have been placed in their care. Jacobs et al. (2011) suggest that much of what learners acquire as they grow is learnt from observing and emulating the people they admire. They add that teachers should be models of humanity and should invoke in learners a real desire for learning. In short, teachers need to teach by example. This suggests that they need to model, in their lives, whatever outcome they expect from learners.

Teachers who regularly come to school late are regarded as another contributing factor in the lack of school discipline. This behaviour obviously violates the teachers’ code of conduct: teachers are expected to be punctual at all times.

The following section will focus on how lack of teacher professionalism is a factor in increasing violence. This will be discussed under the following themes: human dignity, bullying by teachers – derogatory comments, verbal violence against learners and teacher absenteeism.

Human Dignity

Human dignity is upheld by section 10 of the South African Constitution (1996). The Constitution specifically mentions that one’s inherent dignity as a human being should be respected and protected. However, the study indicates that

teachers do not respect learners' dignity: this is demonstrated by the demeaning words they use. Below are some examples of what learner participants have to say on this subject:

We are being abused emotionally and physically by those teachers who stand at the front and tell you that saying "I'm in place of your mother and father", but still have the nerve to tell someone sitting next to me that "you are busy opening your thighs like a "Nandos" chicken".

Most of the emotional violence is from teachers who swear at learners and in an inappropriate way like calling names and shouting and things (Learner, NWP).

There are some teachers who call us these nasty words like bitch because of our short skirts (Learner, NWP).

Prinsloo (2005) argues that human dignity is a critical and extremely fragile component of the multifarious relationships that make up the educational environment, especially because so many minors or otherwise vulnerable and defenceless people are involved. It should be mentioned that the teacher and the learner should work out a solution together. Teachers should not criticise or scold the learner. On the contrary, they should communicate genuine interest and a parental concern for the learner. Prinsloo (2005) identifies the circumstances that lead to the violation of human dignity in the school environment. These are:

- Violation of human dignity may occur during disciplinary action.
- In the daily interaction between teachers and learners, this is an inherently unequal relationship.
- During an initiation programme or ceremony "welcoming" newcomers.
- During informal interactions on the playground, where bullying is an ever-present threat.

Jacobs et al. (2011) argue that what learners eventually become in their adult life is shaped by events they experienced during their school years. It is therefore imperative that an environment be created that is conducive to learning if we want our education system to produce responsible citizens.

Bullying

Unfortunately, the learning environment is dominated by an abusive culture (Jacobs et al.

2011). This study indicates that bullying is a common feature in schools.

Learners are afraid of bullying teachers...Learners are also afraid of each other...Teachers are afraid of bully learners. (SGB member Gauteng)

Ngakane et al. (2012) indicate that bullying is a combination of verbal and physical aggression, and is a form of aggression directed from the agent towards the victim. They add that bullying has an influence on the victim's physical, emotional, social and educational well-being. Bullying can be direct or indirect. Direct bullying involves physical contact or verbal abuse, whereas indirect bullying involves subtle social manipulations such as gossip, spreading rumours, and exclusion.

Teachers' Verbal Violence to Learners

The study indicated that teachers are involved in perpetrating acts of violence against learners, not only in the form of corporal punishment, but also through verbal and emotional abuse. Using the excuse of discipline, learners are called names by their teachers. See, for example, the following quotations:

Teacher calls us by vulgar words. (Learner, Gauteng)

Teacher calls us by vulgar words. (Learner, Mpumalanga)

We would like you to talk to teachers not to ill-treat us. (Learner, NWP)

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 you do one mistake like making noise, she won't say keep quiet normally she would say wrong things like swearing at you and use big words. (Student, NWP)

Teachers need to arrange a private talk with the learner when they are concerned about his or her repeated misbehaviour (this is referred to as "teacher-learner talk" by Jacobs et al. (2011). Teacher-learner talks often resolve problems and are exceptionally conducive to the creation of friendly teacher-learner relationships. Jacobs et al. (2011) suggest the following procedure for conducting these talks. The teacher should do the following:

- a. Express concern about the learner's behaviour.
- b. Describe, in detail, the wrong behaviour in which the learner engages.

- c. Say that this conduct is worrying.
- d. Ask for more information or an explanation.
- e. Work emphatically with the learner.

Jacobs et al. (2011) further argue that teachers must have a positive work ethic, display appropriate values and conduct themselves in a manner which benefits, enhances and develops the teaching profession. One obvious way in which violence can both take place in schools and, via role modelling, have implications for wider society, is when teachers themselves are violent towards students and each other. Sadly, the researchers found examples of such behaviour,

Some teachers will slap you even if there is nothing wrong you are doing. (Learner, NWP)

In Limpopo Province it was overwhelmingly clear that teachers still use verbal abuse and say things that discourage the students. One learner made the following remark:

Teachers that are discouraging us to do some things like last year this teacher discouraged me and said oh you have no future on this stream and I ended up failing because of that because always when I think of reading I think of her that it is the same I am not going to pass as she has said so I ended up changing the stream. (Learner, Limpopo)

However, perhaps the researchers should also make it clear that there are instances where teachers act their part as professionals, which means that learners can trust them. The following quotation is such an example:

I am coping very well because the teachers that are teaching me they are not that abusive. if you don't understand something they are willing to answer you unlike like last year when you say you don't understand something they will say maybe you will understand tomorrow and when you ask them tomorrow they will tell you that go and tell your parent, so this year I am coping very well with a positive attitude towards those subjects so I think I will pass this time. (Learner, Limpopo)

In other words, some teachers treat learners with respect and learners feel safe around them. Needless to say, a positive climate fosters effective teaching and learning.

Teacher Absenteeism

The research results indicate that schools are no longer safe environments, especially if no

teacher is present. Learners reported feeling scared when teachers are not in their classes. The following quotations capture teachers' and learners' views on teacher absenteeism:

Teachers are always absent from school and this results in learners coming late and leaving early from school. (Teacher, Gauteng)

I feel very scared when there is no teacher in class. (Learner, Gauteng)

When the teacher is not in the class, some kids start fighting for the pencils or the ball pens. (Learner, Gauteng)

I feel very scared when there is no teacher in class. (Learner, Mpumalanga)

Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) argue that children cannot thrive when they are afraid. They add that intimidation and fear are the prime consequences of bullying. This is further emphasised by DBE (2010) that any absence of a teacher from school, for whatever reason, has a negative impact on learning and teaching. If the teacher is absent from class, this gives bullies the opportunity to victimise other learners. In some instances, learners resort to "bunking" classes. According to Le Roux and Mokhele (2011), academic performance suffers and learners often avoid attending school for fear of further harassment.

The above findings also show that teachers acknowledged that they often miss classes and this, in turn, creates a situation where learners start fighting among themselves. Apart from this, teacher absenteeism impacts negatively on teaching and learning simply because instructional time is lost. The longer the length of instructional time lost, the more negative the impact, given that the teacher might not be able to make up for the lost instructional time and thus not cover the whole curriculum.

Chapman (1994) reiterates that there is widespread consensus that teacher absenteeism is a major threat to educational quality and efficiency in many developing countries. Chapman further argues that the primary problem caused by teacher absenteeism is the loss of instructional time for pupils. Absenteeism is any failure of an employee to report for or to remain at work as scheduled, regardless of the reason (Cascio 2003). In some instances, teachers do attend school, but are nonetheless absent from their classrooms.

The South African country report, DBE (2011), acknowledges that teacher absenteeism

is a problem in many schools. A study on teachers' leave undertaken by the department indicates that the rate of teachers' leave in South Africa is about 10%. This shows that teacher absenteeism is increasing at an alarming rate and this obviously compromises the ability of our education system to deliver quality education to learners. The Department of Education needs to suggest and implement a systematic and high-level intervention that significantly reduces teacher absenteeism.

CONCLUSION

Combating violence in the school should be taken seriously and should be a joint venture on the part of learners, parents, teachers, principals, department officials and the community itself. The study has shown that violence has an impact on teacher professionalism. If teachers do not feel safe at school they will be de-motivated and this could impact negatively on their teaching. In addition the study has shown that lack of teacher professionalism is a factor in increasing violence in school. Teachers do not model good behaviour for their learners. Learners reported being abused verbally by their teachers. Teacher absenteeism was also indicated as one factor that contributes to violence in schools. In addition the study showed that teachers miss their classes and this creates a fertile ground for violence in classrooms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Collaborative efforts will ensure that all stakeholders have a common understanding of the impact of violence on schools and the public in general. Dealing with school violence will prove to be an elusive goal if topic of violence remains taboo in our schools. What none of the participants mention is the need to actually teach about violence and discuss it with learners as part of the curriculum. Teachers must talk about violence: they must recognise it, examine it, dissect it and let children see and understand its secrets and its sources. Without this examination, violence will remain an ugly secret that society cannot understand or control. Furthermore, seminars at school level should be held to create a platform for both teachers and learners to talk about violence and their experience of violence.

It is therefore recommended that the principles of professional ethics should be emphasised during the initial stages of teachers' professional training, since moral and ethical issues form part of teachers' education programmes. It is a fact that both learners and teachers are influenced by violence in their schools; given this, it is imperative that learners and staff must be empowered to manage all forms of conflict. It is imperative that learners and teachers need to cultivate appropriate ways of dealing with conflict, ways that do not involve resorting to aggression. Both teachers and learners should not resort to violence as a way of dealing with their emotions.

Furthermore, it is recommended that teachers should to model appropriate behaviour and practices to ensure that they invoke in learners a real desire for learning. Teachers also need to inculcate in learners a culture of tolerance and respect for other people's human rights. Programmes that aim at equipping both learners and teachers with conflict and anger management skills are necessary to enable both parties to deal with problems they might face at school. Teachers should receive skills training in dealing with conflict and discipline issues in the school environment, as well as basic trauma counselling. Since violence has a serious impact on people's well-being, it is important that counselling be provided to both victims and perpetrators of violence in our schools.

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