

LYNETTE JACOBS

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT FACES OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE IN DIFFERENT “WORLDS” OF ONE COUNTRY

Abstract

The legacy of South Africa's destructive history is still evident in the different worlds in which South Africans live. Quality education is compromised by violence occurring in schools and role-players must face school violence and take steps to deal with it. This can only be done if school violence is deeply understood within the various school contexts of a diverse country such as South Africa. Towards this insight a survey was conducted in 11 secondary schools from 3 provinces. The aim of this study was to understand school violence through the experiences of learners as victims and onlookers, taking into account various contextual factors within which the South African school system functions. An international questionnaire, adapted for the South African context, was administered to a non-probability sample of 690 learners. Results refute stereotypical thinking about so-called vulnerable schools, but confirm findings from other studies that large schools, in particular, are susceptible to school violence. The study indicated that both learners and staff members alike are guilty of school violence.

The South African school context

The history of colonialism followed by policies of segregation largely influenced all spheres of contemporary South Africa. While 1994 was a watershed in terms of the political landscape, the legacies of apartheid are still evident across the country. Divided into nine provinces, some provinces (e.g. Gauteng) have a more urban character and are densely populated. As a result of the stronger economies, and in the hope for better work opportunities, these provinces experience a high influx of people. Others provinces (e.g. the Eastern Cape) have a more rural character, consist largely of parts that were formerly reserved for the Bantustan, and are still struggling to overcome the disadvantages of the past (cf. Boooyse, 2011a; Boooyse, 2011b; le Roux, 2011a; le Roux, 2011b; Pretorius, 2007).

Different worlds thus exist within South Africa, and schools reflect these worlds. In the urban areas the high influx of learners put pressure on school supply (Pretorius, 2007: 28-29), while lack of infrastructure and overcrowded classrooms remain challenges in less privileged parts of the country (Pretorius, 2007: 29). One of the many challenges that the education system in the country is facing, is the prevalence of violence. Through the media, the South African public is informed about violent incidences taking place in our schools. Articles regularly appear in newspapers under headings such as *Our children are raping each other* (Davids & Makwabe, 2007: 1), *Schoolboy stabbed after 'bad joke'* (Fuzile, 2008: 7) and *Pupil uses mother's gun to kill tormentor, says cops* (Van Schie & SAPA, 2012: 1). While one could argue that the media often gives a twisted interpretation of a situation (Carlyle, Slater & Chakroff, 2008: 169), the problem of school violence has been confirmed in research reports from a variety of academic foci (e.g. De Wet, 2007; Marais & Meier, 2009; Rossouw & Stewart, 2008).

The problem of violence in schools

School violence is not unique to South Africa, and seems to be a problem around the globe. The world was, for instance, stunned towards the end of 2012, by the shootings at an elementary school in Connecticut, where 26 people, mostly Grade 1 learners, died (Bratu, 2012: 1). Although a great deal of research on school violence gets published, Furlong, Morisson, Cornell & Skiba (2004: 7) argue that "empirically driven knowledge about school violence [is] not keeping pace with public interest and the demand for information to inform public policy". Kollapen (2006: 2) similarly states that although role-players and researchers agree that school violence has an adverse effect on the education system, there is an "absence of reliable quantification of the extent of school violence". He expresses his concern:

[T]he environment for effective teaching and learning, for the development of mutual trust and support between learner and teacher – all so critical in the effective delivery of education is severely compromised in an atmosphere where violence reigns (Kollapen, 2006: 2).

In order to decide on meaningful steps to effectively protect the learners, the phenomenon of school violence must be profoundly and critically understood. Towards this understanding, the World Health Organisation (WHO) demarcates *violence* as follows:

[T]he intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has the likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation (WHO, 2002: 4).

Distinction is made between *physical, sexual, psychological violence as well as deprivation and neglect* (WHO, 2002: 5). De Wet (2007a: 77-78) views *school violence* as intentional, detrimental to the educational mission, and damaging to a culture that is supposed to be conducive to teaching and learning, while the Australian National Committee on Violence also included the phenomenon of deliberate damaging of property to the demarcation (De Wet, 2007b: 249). While the definition of *violence* by the WHO informs this paper, what sets *school violence* apart is the context of the school, its fundamental purpose, the educational activities associated with schools, as well as the school community and its property.

Although there are generic issues with regards to school violence, the particular contexts of countries need to be acknowledged. I furthermore argue that while the perspectives of teachers are important in the endeavour to understand school violence, data obtained from school learners themselves is critical to understand this phenomenon. In the light of the prevalence of violence in South African schools and acknowledging the different context within which schools in South Africa can be found, the following research question is thus posed: **What are the experiences of secondary school learners on types of violence in various South African schools?**

Research methodology

In an attempt to answer the research question, a survey was conducted. A questionnaire based on the internationally used research instrument of Benbenishty and Astor (2005) was used, but adapted for the South African school context. Taking into account the difficulty of getting people to take part in surveys in developing countries (Bless, Higson-Smith & Kagee, 2006: 120-121), I put together a convenient sample of 11 schools from three provinces in the country, guided by Davies (2007: 54-55) who provides guidelines for researchers to get a sample that is as good as it can be and a sample that researchers can reach with ease. The necessary permission was obtained to conduct the survey and the schools randomly selected 80 pupils who were willing to participate in the study. Of the 880 questionnaires, the schools returned 713, and I was able to use 690.

In line with the pragmatic research paradigm, I reject the notion that absolute truths about school violence exist. Empirical research can merely provide some insight into a phenomenon, and in this case the insight into the phenomenon of school violence came from the learners' perspectives. Although these perceptions are only partial insights, I took specific steps to enhance the integrity of the survey.

The integrity of the research

I requested that the Life Orientation (LO) teachers should administer the questionnaires at the schools during class time. Not only do issues pertaining to school violence fall within the scope of this learning field, but the LO class should also provide a supportive environment to deal with issues relating to school violence should any have emerged, thus avoiding harm (Strydom, 2005: 58). The questionnaires were neither marked nor numbered, and the instruction to respondents was to not write their names on the questionnaires. Respondents were free to refrain from responding to the items and return their questionnaires blank, and they had to seal the questionnaires before returning them to the teacher.

Strydom (2005: 63) points out that researchers have an ethical responsibility to respondents and to the research community to provide honest and valid research results. In the survey, I used an existing research instrument that has been used extensively in comparative international studies (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). The questionnaire was specifically designed for learners, and I adapted it for the South African context. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency of responses was calculated as 0.9176, which suggests a high level of internal reliability (Nunally in Santos, 1999: 2).

Analysis of data

The data was captured by an experienced person, and analysed using the StatalC11 package. The aggregated data was explored based on the mean scores of data, and significances of differences between mean scores from respondents in various contexts analysed using the Student's *t*-test and the one-way ANOVA statistics (using the *Sheffé post-hoc* test). While these are often used to infer findings, in this paper I use it to differentiate between groups without claiming to generalise the findings.

The following independent variables were used to explore various school contexts:

- Different geographical-demographical contexts:
 - School setting (urban schools and rural schools);
 - Enrolment figures (750 or fewer learners and more than 750 learners).
- Different economical-technological contexts:
 - School classification system of South Africa (poorer schools and more affluent schools).
- Different socio-political contexts:
 - Race composition of the schools (single race school, schools in which the majority of the learners are from one race with a small number of learners from other races (unequally mixed) and multiracial schools).

In the questionnaire, statements are made about school violence. Respondents had to indicate on a five-point scale whether specific acts of violence had taken place in the 12 months prior to the survey. On the scale 5 indicated that the specific violent act *always* occurs, and 1 indicated that it *never* occurs. This implies that any score of above 1 needs to be noted. Using the mentioned four types of violence as dependent variables, in the discussion that follows I will refer to differences between the means of variables as follows: *similar* differences (small differences), *notable* differences (moderate to large, but not statistically significantly) and *statistically significant* differences (95% probability). Unless indicated as a percentage, all figures given reflect the mean scores of the respondents on the variable.

Findings

The findings will be presented by first considering various acts of violence that commonly occur. The different contexts will then be discussed, by firstly referring to the perceptions of the respondents about the magnitude of the problem of school violence, followed by comparing levels of the different types of violence in the various contexts.

Violent acts commonly occurring

It seems that there are specific acts of violence commonly occurring in secondary schools. Deprivation was indicated as the most common type of violence, with a mean score of 2.2664. Certain acts that were indicated in this category to frequently occur are that learners generally steal things from each other and from teachers (77%), that respondents were the victims of theft of personal belongings (57%) and also the victims of belongings being damaged or destroyed (24%).

Psychological violence was reported to be second most common form of violence in the schools that took part in this study. The mean score of all items measuring psychological school violence is 1.8268. This includes learners being threatened and bullied at their school (68%); and teachers cursing, insulting or verbally humiliating learners (52%).

The mean score of all items measuring physical violence is 1.7716. Common forms in this category are learners getting into physical fights (67%); learners pushing and shoving each other (64%); and staff members administering corporal punishment (48%).

The mean score of all items measuring sexual violence is 1.4731, suggesting that at the schools in my sample sexual violence is, on average, a lesser problem than other forms of violence. However, when one looks at the specific acts of sexual school violence specific problems are pointed out by respondents. 43% of the respondents indicated that boys sexually harass the girls, while 20% indicated that the teachers sexually harass the learners. 2% indicated that they were sexually abused by teachers during the preceding 12 months period and 1% indicated that they were raped by a fellow learner during this period.

From the above it seems as if both learners and teachers are perpetrators in acts of school violence. The above trends are based on aggregated data from all respondents and the views of respondents from different contexts follow.

School setting

Learners from rural schools (2.7129) are slightly more concerned about the levels of school violence than those from urban schools (2.5590), yet in these two contexts, the levels of physical violence and the levels of deprivation were similar. Psychological violence is notably more prevalent in urban schools (1.8566) than in their rural counterparts (1.7900), while sexual violence seems to be moderately more common in rural schools (1.4923) than in urban schools (1.4562).

Learner enrolment

School violence is perceived by respondents at larger schools to be more of a problem (2.752) than by respondents who attend smaller schools (2.540), a difference that is statistically significant. The reporting of some types of violence concurs with this concern. The level of physical violence in larger schools (1.8286) is statistically significantly higher than in smaller schools (1.7273), while the level of psychological violence (1.8566) is notably more than in smaller schools (1.7900). However, the level of sexual violence and the levels of deprivation are similar in these two contexts.

Economical context

Respondents from more affluent schools (2.726) are statistically significantly more concerned about the problem of school violence than those from disadvantaged schools (2.474). They also reported notably higher levels of physical violence (1.7953) than the less affluent schools (1.7292). The more affluent schools reported statistically significantly higher levels of psychological violence (1.8733) than the less affluent schools (1.7444). On the other hand, the levels of deprivation and the levels of sexual violence are similar.

Race composition

In this sample, in the schools where the majority of learners are from one race and a small percentage of learners are from other races, respondents were statistically significantly more concerned about the level of school violence at their schools (2.934) than respondents from multiracial schools (2.780) and those from single-race schools (2.389). Schools with the majority of learners from one race and

a small number of learners from other racial groups experience the highest levels of physical violence (1.8035), followed by multiracial schools (1.7888) and single race schools (1.7434). Psychological violence at single-race schools in this sample (1.7486) was statistically significantly lower than the levels in the schools where the majority of learners are from one race (1.8777), and also statistically significantly lower than the levels in multiracial schools (1.9060). Sexual school violence, in the multiracial schools in this sample (1.4245), is statistically significantly lower than in the schools where the majority of learners is from one race (1.5431), and notably lower than single race schools (1.4706).

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper I considered how the various types of school violence acts are experienced by respondents from various school contexts. Physical school violence seems to be more of a problem in more affluent and larger schools. Psychological school violence is a problem particularly in larger schools, urban schools, more affluent schools, multiracial schools, and schools where the majority of learners are from one race. Although school size and the economic status of schools do not seem to influence the level of sexual school violence, in schools where the majority of learners are from one race, sexual school violence seems to be a problem. Deprivation is a common problem in all the schools that took part in the study.

In South Africa, many worlds exist and children attend school in a variety of contexts. Yet, while some statistical difference can be noted in the levels of some forms of violence in different contexts, contrary to stereotypical thinking in South Africa, and to the general message that is purported in the media (cf. Jacobs, 2012: 26-84), there are more similarities than differences with regard to occurrences of school violence in the various worlds that exist in South Africa. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders to acknowledge the problem and to comprehensively take steps to lower the levels of violence in all schools.

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Dr Lynette Jacobs
School of Education Sciences
University of the Free State
South Africa
JacobsL@ufs.ac.za