

Fighting the scourge

Violence at school plagues teachers and learners

Violence and crime are antisocial maladies beleaguering a significant number of schools in South Africa. These ailments have debilitating effects on learning and teaching, posing a major management problem for school principals and their management teams. **TSHILIDZI NETSHITANGANI** reports on a pilot study that investigated the internal dynamics of schools where these incidents occur.

Prin cipals have had to implement a wide range of measures developed by government, non-governmental organisations and school governing bodies (SGBs) to exterminate school-based violence.

The phenomenon of school-based violence is international in both its scope and scale. South Africa has had its share of this scourge.

Whereas serious acts of violence occurring in schools were not a regular feature of the former racially divided schooling system in South Africa, there seems to have been an unprecedented increase in these acts in the post-1994 democratic dispensation.

Of more significance is that violence and crime directly affect the school principals' and teachers' managerial and instructional duties, consequently exacerbating the problem of achieving quality education.

The HSRC undertook a pilot study in Gauteng to understand this disturbing development.

SCHOOL-BASED VIOLENCE DEFINED

School-based violence can generally be described as threats, weapon possession, or physical conduct or intimidation perpetrated against learners and staff while at school or travelling to and from school. Learners are exposed to various kinds of crime and violence at schools, including physical and sexual assault, robbery, intimidation, bullying, shooting, stabbing, gangsterism and drug trafficking.

Normalisation theory underpinned the research undertaken for this study, which advocates that children who are exposed to more risk than protective factors are more likely to use violence. The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) reports talk about

'the normalisation of violence' in South Africa. Because young people's sense of identity is shaped by what they see around them, and because crime is so rife, many schoolchildren see crime and violence as normal.

METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

As part of a larger investigation into the phenomenon of school-based violence, this pilot study focused primarily on the internal dynamics in schools.

We visited four secondary schools in Gauteng that have experienced relatively large measures of any form of violence. We interviewed principals, deputy principals and their school management teams (SMTs), teachers and school governing bodies (SGBs). Principals were interviewed individually, while focus group interviews were used to interview SMTs, teachers and the parent component of SGBs.

Surprisingly, educators strongly identified the abolition of corporal punishment as a problem, carefully stating that, although some educators abused it, in general it was a helpful strategy.

HOW VIOLENCE AFFECTS TEACHING

Violence in schools affects teaching because it wastes time in school. Most learners get excited and become uncontrollable; they enjoy it when less serious cases, like fighting over a partner, occur.

When an act of violence occurs, it generally results in disruption of the normal teaching and learning activities, as some learners run towards or away from the scene, while others are fearful and uncertain of what will happen next, wanting to go home as soon as possible.

Learners involved in violent acts are disruptive, imbued with a spirit of wanting to demonstrate their 'heroic' status and be emulated by other learners.

Other learners might feel uncomfortable and 'shy away' from the perpetrators, as they become afraid of them. The learners receiving counselling take time to catch up with the rest of the class.

VIOLENT LEARNERS IN CLASS

The study also revealed that learners who were perpetrators of violent acts generally show poor performance. Sometimes, violent behaviour could be a demonstration or rationalisation of their underperformance or feeling of 'exclusion' from the 'mainstream'-performing categories of learners.

Such learners create disturbances in class to attract attention. Some of the children, particularly the student leadership (the Learner Representative Council or LRC), assist in controlling violent learners in class.

But, in general, perpetrators relate normally to other learners, educators and management.



What is interesting is that educators generally do not have difficulty dealing with aggressors in classrooms as they tend to use the opportunity to come up with strategies to deal with them. Both educators and management relate well to violent learners and this good relationship is used as a strategy for giving violent learners the attention needed to modify their behaviour and monitoring how such learners do so.

Educators are generally supportive of such learners, and understand that they are in need of the kind of help and interventions they lack at home. Depending on the nature of the violation, educators see it as their responsibility to contribute towards their learners' character moulding.

GENDERED LENS

What emerged was that female teachers, particularly young teachers, felt more unsafe on the school premises than their male counterparts. When intimidated by learners they tend to ignore such learners – a reaction not

consistent with individual classroom-based strategies and, as a result, effective teaching is compromised. Female teachers depended strongly on male teachers for security on the school premises and had confidence that male teachers would be able to assist them in such a situation.

DISCIPLINE AT SCHOOL

Some violent acts are a result of the indiscipline of learners, which is attributed to a lack of parental guidance as most parents are absent from homes for various unavoidable reasons. In addition, some mothers, both educated and uneducated, always defend their children, denying the school's version of their children's behaviour.

Further, principals, educators and some parents believe that government's policies on violence reduce the educators' right to discipline a child in class. It was indicated that for schools to instill discipline and ensure a violence-free learning environment, educators must be given enough power to control vio-

lent behaviour in their classes, which requires that long and complex procedures to be addressed.

The major issue is that government policies emphasise learners' rights, but under-emphasise their responsibilities. The passionate voice of these educators suggests that for government initiatives to meet the objective of assisting schools to manage violence, a trade-off between the two extremes (learner rights versus learner responsibilities) needs to be negotiated.

Critically, however, allowing violent children into class compromises the rights of the larger group of learners in a class. The latter become the victim of circumstance because their Constitutional right to a safe and conducive learning environment is violated.

Thus, for a policy to be fair, it must promote the rights of both the aggressors and the non-aggressors. This constitutes a formidable policy challenge. This 'skewed child right' agenda is not only one of the major causes of escalating indiscipline, but also makes it difficult for educators to discipline violent learners in schools.

The role of the LRC is also crucial in the school. The LRC is governed by a committee, and members of the LRC also assist with discipline. Like educators, they walk around to observe, and if something unacceptable is noticed it is reported immediately for action. The LRC is therefore very helpful in maintaining discipline at school and in eliminating school-based violence.

Surprisingly, educators strongly identified the abolition of corporal punishment as a problem, carefully stating that, although some educators abused it, in general it was a helpful strategy. Their constant lament was that the national office of the Department of Basic Education provided them with rules and regulations but did not empower educators to implement them. These views clearly demonstrate the frustration of educators in dealing effectively with violence and disciplined behaviour among learners.

These preliminary findings will be compiled into a final report, which will be available later this year. ◀ ◀

AUTHOR:

Dr Tshilidzi Netshitangani, senior research manager, Education and Skills Development programme, HSRC.



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