



Research Article

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Perceptions of Three South African Primary School Principals on the School – Based Violence

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Abstract

This paper investigated the perceptions of three selected South African primary school principals based in Jabulane - Soweto on School-based Violence (SBV). The qualitative research approach was used with participants purposively selected from three primary schools. The study was based on the interpretive paradigm, and as such the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected school principals. The data collected from participants was analysed and categorised into themes. The collected data gave the participants' perceptions on the role of intergroup conflicts, and how it perpetuates school-based violence. The paper is underpinned by Social Conflict Theory.

Keywords: antisocial behaviour, intergroup conflicts school-based violence, perceptions, socialisation

1. Introduction

The South African schools are under siege as school-based violence (SBV) takes a centre stage and the safety of both learners and teachers is not guaranteed. It is based on these school violent related incidents that the researchers of this paper are of the view that the environment and climate necessary for effective teaching and learning is increasingly undermined by a culture of school-based violence. School-based violence is

a new deep-rooted culture in South African education system, making schools unsafe and insecure (Masitsa, 2011). The SACE Report (2011) quotes Burton (2008), asserting that the school is a space in which children can come and learn in a safe and protected environment; however, in reality this is not the case. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) defines school violence as any intentional use of physical or other force or power to threaten another person or a group.

In addition to the above argument, Jacob and Furgerson (2012) further highlighted some of the key features of school violence, that SBV is intended or is the use of psychological power or physical force with the aim of harming another physically or emotionally. Secondly, SBV involves the manipulation and the use of coercion, as well as rejection, that takes place during or outside school hours, such as during class times and breaks, at school-related events (sport, cultural and social), as well as commuting to and from school. In this view, the school violence expresses itself through physical and psychological forms. Thus, Physical violence is often observed through beating, kicking and punching one another, as well as physical assault whereas psychological violence manifests itself through emotional abuse of victims by the perpetrators accompanied by alienation.

Mncube and Steinmann (2014) are of the opinion that school violence is prevalent in most South African schools and manifests itself as gang-related violence. Masitsa (2011) agrees with the above scholars by arguing that there are a number of laws and policy guidelines aimed at protecting the learners and the teachers in schools; despite these, schools remain unsafe. On the other hand, Segoe and Mokgosi (2007) assert that safe and non-violent schools are linked to safe and non-violent communities. It in the backdrop of media headlines such as; “We will hunt you down, cops tell Bloem school gangs (Shange, 2015), that this paper is undertaken to gain an understanding on the role played by school gangs in SBV. This was published after one of the Grade 11 learner was fatally stabbed by a member of Marona gang. The aftermath of this killing was an attack of several learners and the community taking arms against the school gangs in Mangaung - Bloemfontein (Shange, 2015). However, the spate of revenge attacks by the community members was halted by the intervention by the police and the arrest of the of the alleged killer. Van der Merwe (2015), added on school violence by bringing in another incidence that took place in the Western Cape Province which is perceived to be the capital of gang-related violence and crime in South Africa, with an estimated 100 000 gang members (Van der Merwe, 2015), the courts recently convicted a 21-year-old male gang member for shooting and killing a Grade 12 learner. Burton and Leoschut (2012) declare that schools are a microcosm of broader communities in which they are located; social issues permeate the schools as 49.6 % of crime and violence is widespread in the communities in which learners live. Thus, intergroup conflict or gang-related violence permeates schools and manifests itself through bullying, intimidation and harassment of teachers, sexual violence and carrying of weapons (Mncube & Steinmann, 2014). The Maphalala and Mabunda (2014) research study found out that

intergroup conflict or gang-related violent activities are carried out by learners as young as 13 years old who fear victimisation and are recruited as a result of sporadic fights increase. The young learners are attracted into gang activities for money, power and glamour of gangsterism. In this regard, School gang activities not only affect the perpetrators but the victims as well. The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions of three South African township school principals concerning school - based violence.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is underpinned by Social conflict theory to describe school-based violence as a subset of a social conflict. According to Coser (1956, p.214), social conflict theory seeks to scientifically explain the “general contours of conflict in society: how conflict starts and varies, and the effects it brings.” Coser (1956) further argues that the group controls access to class and power, and status is likely to have its legitimacy questioned. Schools are macro- levels of society and as such reflect how society operates, interacts in conflict situations and more importantly however members deal with issues of deprivation, competition for scarce resources and formulation of perceptions during the conflict. The competition for resources manifests itself on two levels, either as personal or intergroup threat (Redmond & Serrano, 2015). Both threats force individuals into reactive mode to protect their own identity or their resources (Redmond & Serrano, 2015). In terms of the social conflict any conflict has dynamics which include escalation, aggravators and moderators, the shift in tactics of parties in conflict, as well as their mutual perceptions (Anstey, 2006). According to Bradshaw (2008), social conflict flows in a particular pattern with a starting point known as escalation which also involves conflict spirals and a second stage, often referred to as the stalemate stage, when the conflict becomes exhausted.

3. Methodology

The research methodology in this paper explains the methods by which the research was conducted. Methodology is a detailed master plan or strategy that guides the whole research process as per the phenomenon under study. Almalki (2016) stipulates that methodology refers to the procedures by which researchers go about their work of describing, explaining and predicting phenomena as well as the standards that will be utilized for the interpretation of information and drawing of conclusions.

3.1 Qualitative Research Approach

This research study applied the qualitative research. Blaikie (2010) is of the view that the qualitative research approach focuses on original data produced in two languages, the

technical language of the researcher or the everyday language of the respondents. The language used in this approach is to “describe behaviour, social relationships, social processes, social situations and meanings given to these activities” (Blaikie, 2010:204). In view of this, Neuman (2006:149) maintains that to capture the language of cases and contexts and interpret or create meaning in specific settings, qualitative research is appropriate because it is more concerned about “issues of richness, texture, and feeling of raw data”. Janesick (2011:11) argues that qualitative research has characteristics - among others holistic – to give a “whole picture of the social context under study.” In its holistic nature, the qualitative research focuses on details and “understanding the social setting rather than predicting and controlling” (Janesick, 2011). The other reason for the choice of the qualitative research approach is that qualitative research approach is a flexible approach which uses social actors’ points of view to describe in detail social actors’ interactions and process with the aim of developing concepts and theory (Blaikie, 2010).

3.2 *Data Analysis*

The data analysis strategy used in the study facilitates the development of grounded theory, which is based or grounded in the data as it is developed from the data and accurately reflects the data. The qualitative research approach in this study was used to extract and explain the perceptions and feelings of the respondents regarding the role of intergroup conflicts of SBV in the selected schools. To support this research approach, the interpretivist research paradigm was also used to understand how the respondents construct and interpret social reality. Thus, the phenomenological research approach was also applied in this study in order to gain in-depth understanding of respondents’ experiences around SBV as a specific phenomenon. In light of this, these two research approaches were applied in conjunction with the qualitative research approach whereby the interpretivist research paradigm was also used to understand how the respondents construct and interpret social reality and gain in-depth understanding of respondents’ experiences around SBV phenomenon. In this regard, the researcher interacted with the participants using the semi-structured or unstructured interview questions. The selected school principals were invited to participate in the study after obtaining permission from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) and Johannesburg Central Education District (JCED). The researcher collected the data from the participants and voice recorded it after obtaining consent from the participants. The recorded voice data was transcribed by the researcher verbatim to arrange it in unit themes. The data was analysed and compared to identify common trends.

3.3 *Sampling*

Purposive sampling was also selected and used for obtaining data in qualitative research from the participants in this study and suited well in investigating the perceptions of the

school principals on SBV. According to Gledhill and Schweitzer (2008), purposive sampling is often used when small samples are studied using intense, focused methods such as in-depth interviews. The in-depth interview offers a unique means of understanding complex human behaviour and is regarded as a 'best fit' as it generates large amounts of valuable data obtained from a free flowing communication process of the respondents (Punch, 1998). Therefore this study, purposively selected three primary school principals in Jabulani, because some experienced violence in the past and the others still do. In this view, the researcher made concerted efforts to comply with and observe several ethical principles during the research study. Thus, the research was conducted on sites (schools) and study applied, complied with and observed with most ethical principles; among others: the consequential principle, the deontological principle, beneficence, respect for autonomy of participants' persons, informed consent and confidentiality, the principle of justice and the principle of fidelity. School principal participants gave consent for their participation in the study voluntarily.

4. The Discussion of Findings

This study found a number of causes of SBV and these included the unruly and rude learners who display antisocial behaviour towards other learners, teachers and the figures of authority in a school. Central to these learners antisocial and violent behaviour, this study found that learners' violent family background, inappropriate socialisation and normalisation of violent behaviour and teachers who model aggressive and violent behaviour; greatly influenced their chances of assimilating violence as a mode of appropriate behaviour. Furthermore, this study found that SBV have dire consequences on learning and teaching culture in a school through excessive disruptions and promotion of counter and revenge groups with a potential of perpetuating the formation of intergroup conflicts in a school. This study also found out a relationship between SBV and gangsterism, with the latter exacerbated by competition for limited resources, peer pressure and the need of belonging and protection.

The seriousness and the intense effects of the SBV are expressed by the (school principals) participants who are tasked to ensure safety of the learners, teachers and staff in their respective schools through implementation of School Safety Policies (SSP). However, it emerged from the interviews that despite the availability of SSP, the scourge of SBV seems to be overwhelming and violent behaviour and culture is embedded in learners, teachers and some principals alike. The findings below represent the frustrations of the heads of learning institutions in an attempt to bring sanity to the abnormal situations.

4.1 Causes of SBV

This study found out that (school principals) participants have perceptions that SBV is mainly perpetrated by learners who display a particular antisocial behaviour in schools.

The factors that perpetuate SBV in schools according to participants include; learners' family background, learners' violent environments, learners' socialisation and the role of the media as well as the teachers' personal dispositions. The following data would be presented and discussed by the researchers through the following participants: principal 1, principal 2 and principal 3.

Principal 1 mentioned that SBV is perpetrated:

Largely by rude and ill- disciplined learners

Principal 2 echoed these sentiments by stating that SBV is caused mainly:

By unruly and academically challenged ... in primary schools characterised by mostly kicking, fist fighting, and revenge attacks and stealing of food, money and lunch boxes learners

The 'unruly and rude' learners were found not to be alone in perpetrating SBV, as this study found that teachers through meting out corporal punishment on learners subject and expose learners to violence.

4.1.1 Learners' family background

Families are primary source of all values and prosocial behaviour of a child. The home is the first socialisation agent in which a child learns the acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. This is done through parental modelling the desired behaviour to the child as well as sanctioning the unacceptable one. This study found out that violence - ridden homes characterised by domestic violence influence the children negatively. Principal 1 attributed the manifestation of SBV to a number of factors among them, domestic violence and commented;

Learners from broken families, families which are experiencing domestic violence are prone to be bullies at school"

Principal 2 alluded to the fact that some parents have abdicated from the parental responsibility and remarked;

Present but absent (parents), they don't play the parental role of talking and teaching their children

The absence of parental control and monitoring of learns at homes is translated in learners who do as they please and often undermine and reject discipline and authority from teachers and principals alike. Principal 2 further added that:

Poor education levels of parents also contribute as the low education level of the

parents, the higher the chances of violence at home. Is worse if parents' abuse alcohol, domestic fights are just common. What do you expect from the learners?

4.1.2 Learners' socialisation and immediate environment

Participants indicated that children's socialisation and environment are contributing factors to violent behaviour. Learners learn violent behaviour from parents, peers, teachers, and the media and through the socialisation process. Principal 1 argued that:

Learners' socialisation with violent peers reinforces anti-social behaviour. The learners' access to internet, violent video games, violent movies and TV soaps and dramas, all make violence look cool and acceptable

Principal 2 concurred with principal 1 in that the television contributes to the learners' violent behaviour and stated:

TV is the main culprit, particularly wrestling as these young boys copy those giants they see on TV beating each other mercilessly and hardly bleed. The violent movies are portrayed as cool and the violent guys as victors

Mncube and Harber (2013) assert that the social and psychological connections explain the causes of violent behaviour in relation to socialisation prevalent in schools. Besides socialisation, modelling in a school environment is the most powerful means of influencing behaviour. This assertion is supported by Principal 1 who remarked:

For learners also, their immediate violent environments reinforce violence as a normal and acceptable way of life and means to settling disputes

This assertion is further shared by Ward, Van der Merwe, and Dawes (2012) that socially disorganised communities are unable to realise common prosocial values among their residents and so are unable to maintain effective social controls. This means that families that encourage prosocial norms are often challenged by different standards of behaviour in the neighbourhood and the family values are less likely to be upheld by the environment or neighbourhood. Community violent culture in which the learners are raised into and exposed to; inevitably normalise the use of violence as acceptable. Principal 2 contextualised this assertion by stating that:

Our communities are violent, our learners experience violence in the neighbouring taverns, all these makes it obvious – our learners will be violent as their environment is nothing else but violence

Similarly Nord (1976) cited in Van der Westhuizen (2007), noted that a person who lives in a particular culture for long enough is likely to be influenced by it.

4.1.3 Teachers' personal circumstances

This study found out that the teachers as they execute their *loco parentis* roles in the selected schools, some of them are still traditional teachers who employ traditional means of discipline and control over their learners and worse, they break the law by meting out corporal punishment. Principal 1 also stated that:

Teachers want to be feared by learners and believe that teaching and learning can only take place under strictly controlled conditions. Most teachers were themselves subjected to corporal punishment during their school years and they do not know any alternative discipline except corporal punishment.

This statement is not an isolated case as corporal punishment meted out by teachers on the learners is on the rise. There seems to a challenge of traditional teachers having to teach and nurture the modern, sophisticated and technologically advance generation. This study as part of its recommendation proposes peace education strategy to bridge the gap between the teachers and the learners to engage in peaceful resolution of conflicts. Teachers' personal problems according to this study were found out to play a role in perpetuating SBV. Principal 1 also commented that:

Personal problems, stress, depression and work overload are at times the causes for teachers to lose their cool, their temper. these rude learners who actually push you no matter how much you try to keep calm. Despite the pressure, as principals we have to refrain from breaking the law and be role models to our learners.

Teachers as workers carry personal burdens as indicated above into the work place or classrooms. Personal dispositions do affect the way teachers treat learners who are often in need of attention and parental love and only find that teachers are in a sombre mood on the particular day.

5. Effects of SBV

SBV affects both the learners and teachers alike and its effects and impact have dire consequences to the effective culture of teaching and learning in schools. This study found out that principals complain of widespread disruption of teaching in their schools due to SBV. According to Principal 1, SBV manifested through bullying is:

Disruptive for the teachers as they lose focus in class. The whole class often suffer because more attention to paid to the bully.

The disruptive learners were found out to be bullies who seek attention to compensate their academic shortfall. Mncube and Harber (2013) assert that learners

who are poor academic performers easily assimilated into gangs where they are accepted and recognised as part of the organisation. Furthermore Principal 1 commented on the bullies attention seeking tactics that;

Learners get hyped up as they try to keep track of the bully's tricks and drama. The office is turned into a court with hours spent by the teacher and the principal interviewing the bully.

Order and discipline are the prerequisites for effective teaching and learning in any school. Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) cite the Human Rights Commission (2006) that found that; the environment and climate necessary for effective teaching and learning is increasingly undermined by a culture of school-based violence and this is becoming a matter of national concern. This study found that bullying as a form of SBV is a deterrent to effective learning. This finding concurs with research findings of Ward, Van der Merwe, and Dawes (2012), that bullying or intimidation that occurs in school, not only affect teaching and learning, but learners learn in fear as the levels of extortion increase when bullies demand payment from non-members in exchange for protection from gang violence. The other notable effect of SBV and bullying according to participants was the total disregard of authority as a hallmark of gangsters in schools.

Principal 3 alluded to the fact that gangs in her school show:

Bossy behaviour disregard of authority and more involved in recruiting other learners to join them".

The antisocial behaviour of the gangsters in a school environment not only affects other learners, but has a negative impact on the teachers and the principals as well, as they are treated with disrespect and their positions and authority are constantly undermined. Principal 2 concurred with this statement and commented that:

Rude and unruly learners think they are licensed to ridicule others and think foreign learners have less protection and rights than them".

This assertion further confirms the principal participants' perceptions that the rude and unruly are largely responsible for SBV in the schools understudy. As the incidents of SBV increase in the school, victims of SBV either defend themselves or join the gangs. In violent ridden environment, there is need of belonging to a group for protection. Principal 2 remarked that;

Belonging to a gang is cool and provides benefits such as protection, loot from rivals, girlfriends and respect

This assertion concurs with Swartz, de la Rey, Duncan and Townsend, (2013); argument that gangs provide adolescents with structured life, protection, status and a

sense of belonging. According to Walsh and Mitchell (2006), in their study on violence in the Western Cape, gang membership represents an opportunity for young men to gain social status, a sense of security and community, and the potential for economic gain. The other finding of this study is that, learners are easily recruited and even succumb to peer pressure and join gangsters because the gangs offer love and acceptance. Principal 1 commented;

Gangs offer home for some learners and at times more love and acceptance than what is offered by parents and teachers.

The 'home' offered by the gangsters is the feeling of belonging, family and promise of fraternity and brotherhood (Mncube & Madiya, 2014). Similarly, De Jager (2008) describes the family concept as group cohesion and a sense of 'we-ness' among the gang members. According to Bradshaw (2008), when human needs such as identity, independence, security, love, acceptance and control are denied, frustration is the outcome. Learners are drawn into gangsters because of deprivation, neglect and often rejection by parents and teacher, resulting in frustration and the gangsters fill the vacuum. Kriesberg (1982) argues that frustration and aggression are primarily expressions of deprivation involving both social relationships and social interaction. The sense of belonging, love and acceptance by learners drawn to the gangsters, confirms Marotz, Allen, K.E. Shaffer, Kipp (2014), argument that children actively socialise themselves and they are not merely passive pawns of social influence.

6. Conclusion

This study captured the school principals' perceptions on SBV firstly by highlighting the causes of SBV initiated by rude and unruly learners who display antisocial behaviour. More importantly, this study found out that the family background of the learners, their immediate environment and their socialisation are mainly responsible for perpetuating violent behaviour among the learners. However, it also emerged that learners are not the only ones responsible for violent incidents in schools; teachers were also found responsible by meting out corporal punishment to the learners. The participants also alluded to the fact that SBV has a devastating effect on the culture of learning and teaching in schools. Among the noted negative effects of SBV are: disruptive nature in learning and teaching of learners, learners loses focus and attention in completing school tasks and it promotes the formation of counter groups. The participants' perceptions regarding SBV can be summed as driven by the rude and unruly learners, who come from violent ridden homes and cause untold disruptions to teaching and learning in schools.

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