# Preventing Violence in South African schools:
# Control and Punish or more Effective School Management?

## Vusi Mncube

*University of South Africa*
*Email: mncubvs@unisa.ac.za*

*Abstract*

*The paper is based on a qualitative study conducted in South African schools to obtain insights and understanding of the how and why of violence in schools based on the perceptions and experiences of teachers, learners, principals, support staff and School Governing Bodies (SGBs). Semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and observations were conducted to collect data. The study also employed 'quantitative' research methodology so questionnaires were administered across six provinces in South Africa. The study reveals that many teachers are verbally, physically (use corporal punishment) and psychologically violent towards learners. Lack of professionalism, teacher absenteeism and non-punctuality contribute to violence. There is evidence in the report of some schools' failure to take into account the individual needs of young people by trying to control them in a generic manner resulting in violent rebelliousness. There is evidence in the report that many schools are not managed well. It emerged that because of authoritarianism, schools are failing to protect learners from violence. Thus, policy makers and educationalists will have to change ways of reducing violence in schools from those that emphasise punishment, control and surveillance of learners to employing strategies that eliminate authoritarianism and increase effective school organisation and culture.*

*Keywords: Discipline, school management, governance, democracy, power, control*

## 1. Introduction

The scourge of violence in South African schools is cause for concern. Daily reports appear in the written and electronic media about high levels of violence, physical and sexual abuse, and gang-related activities in our schools. Carrying knives, guns and other weapons have become part of daily school life. These incidents underline the extent of violence and crime we experience in our communities, which generally impacts negatively on education and what happens in the school in particular.

During the process of data collection for this study, two learners died on school premises in two unrelated incidents. The Eye Witness News (01 March 2012) reported that a 16-year-old boy was killed at Beauvallon Secondary School in Valhalla Park, Western Cape. The learner was stabbed by another learner during break time. Three others were wounded. Two learners fled the scene and a third one was treated on the school grounds. In another incident, The Citizen (02 March 2012) reported that an 18-year-old boy was stabbed once in the neck and died outside the school gates of Vorentoe High School in Auckland Park, Johannesburg, allegedly in a fight over a ball.

Schools are supposed to have policies in place and a learner code of conduct to deter violent behaviour. These school policies and the learner code of conduct are meant, among other things, to impede the use of drugs or any intoxicating substance, the carrying of weapons or any sharp objects, the use of violent or vulgar language, and also to discourage threats against persons or their property. Despite the existence of such policies, violence, physical and sexual abuse, and gang activities are still the order of the day in many South African schools. This study is not only exploring the problem in South Africa within a wider international context but is also suggesting some underlying reasons for the prevalence of violence in South African schools and what might be done to improve the situation.

In February 2007, the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation was contracted by the South African government to carry out a study on the nature of crime and violence in South Africa. The study concluded that the country is exposed to high levels of violence as a result of different factors, including:

- The normalisation of violence. Violence comes to be seen as a necessary and justified means of resolving conflict, and males believe that coercive sexual behaviour against women is legitimate.
- A subculture of violence and criminality, ranging from individual criminals who rape or rob to informal groups

or more formalised gangs. Those involved in this subculture are engaged in criminal careers and commonly use firearms, with the exception of Cape Town where knife violence is more prevalent. Credibility within this subculture is related to the readiness to resort to extreme violence.

- The vulnerability of young people linked to inadequate child rearing and poor youth socialisation. As a result of poverty, unstable living arrangements and being brought up with inconsistent and uncaring parenting, some South African children are exposed to risk factors which enhance the chances that they will become involved in criminality and violence.

- The high levels of inequality, poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and marginalisation') (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2009)

Indeed, in relation to the last point and as is noted in the report, South Africa is indeed marked by continuing 'structural violence', that is the existence of oppressive and unequal socio-economic and political relationships (Galtung, 1975). Despite a relatively strong performance in terms of economic growth since 1994, South Africa still has one of the most unequal societies in the world with between 45% and 55% of the population categorised as poor and between 20% and 25% as in extreme poverty and there are spatial, racial and gender dimensions to this poverty (McGrath & Akooje, 2007:422/3). In reply to a parliamentary question which expressed concern that South Africa's Gini coefficient (the way of measuring economic inequality in societies) was the world's worst, the President of South Africa acknowledged that the benefits of economic growth at present "go disproportionately to the richest ten percent of households (*Business Report* 29/11/2011 www.iol.co.za) . Interestingly, in their book *The Spirit Level*, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) provide evidence of a link between inequality and violence in the societies of OECD countries – the higher the level of economic inequality, the higher the level of violence.

It is also the understanding of this report that the bases of violence are social rather than genetic or biological and that therefore there are ways and means of reducing human violence. The authoritative 1986 Seville Statement on violence, adopted by UNESCO in 1989, concluded that,

> '...biology does not condemn humanity to war...just as "wars begin in the minds of men", peace also begins in our minds' (UNESCO, 1989).

Violence affects schools and takes place within schools. For example, one of the authors came across the report in the Durban Mercury as the work on the project was in progress,

> 'A Newcastle school principal has been suspended with immediate effect after he allegedly repeatedly punched and struck a teacher with a home-made knife in full view of teachers and pupils at the school yesterday morning…(Provincial) Spokesman Muzi Mahlambi said 'The Head of Department has just handed a letter of suspension to the principal. We cannot be urging our pupils not to carry weapons to school while teachers, especially the principal, are guilty of just that'… (the teacher said that) the principal assaulted him for his late arrival at work the previous day'

Daily reports appear in the written and electronic media about high levels of violence, physical and sexual abuse and gang related activities in South African schools. Carrying of knives, guns and other weapons is part of daily school life. This obviously impacts negatively on education in general and particularly what happens in schools.

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks: The Why of Violence in Schools

How do we explain violence in schools? One argument, suggested in the discussion above, is that schools are a microcosm of society and that they merely reflect or mirror the violence of the broader society. It is worrying that schools are not better in protecting children from the negative elements of the broader society. However, schools are not necessarily completely vulnerable to external violence in a violent society. A key factor in the extent to which schools can resist violence in the broader society is the extent to which the school is, and sees itself as, a well-organised and managed community with a determination to protect and care for its learners by means of a clear approach to safety and security. Research conducted at three schools in the Durban area of Kwazulu-Natal (Harber 2001a) suggested that the more effectively the school is run, the less chance of violence coming in from the outside and the less chance of it being generated inside. Indeed, a well-run school with a more inclusive, democratic environment helps to foster a climate of openness and a sense of ownership, commitment, and responsibility amongst all members and therefore strengthens its determination to resist external violence and minimise internal violence. It was also important that all three schools had actually stopped using corporal punishment in line with the law thus, both reducing an internal climate of violence and

improving relationships between staff and learners. Instead, through codes of conduct, clear implementation of the rules and alternative forms of punishment, such as clearing up litter in the schools, are used to provide an ordered, safe, and essentially peaceful environment where both internal and external crime and violence are reduced to a minimum. Such a school also tries to reach out to and have good relationships with the local community, though at these three schools this is not easy because of the physical distance of many parents from the schools.

There are many effective and well-organised schools in South Africa. Importantly, there are many examples of such schools that are functioning effectively, achieving good examination results despite the fact that some of them are situated in areas affected by poverty and poor resources (Harber, 2001b; Bloch, 2009). Bloch quotes the head of Bhukulani High School in Soweto, which has a matriculation pass rate of over 90%, who is of the view that schools work simply because there are people who are prepared to work, who are turning up for class on time, and who are teaching effectively. Comparing this school to another equally successful school in a poor area, Block comments that: "There is a detailed set of planning processes and systems to ensure success, no magic formula." The role of the head is important as "teachers need the administrative efficiency and ordered predictability of a well-run school" (Bloch, 2009:136). He further cites a ministerial committee that examined the nature of successful schools in South Africa, which found that the key to success was doing the basics well.

Firstly, all of the schools were focused on their central tasks of teaching, learning and management with a sense of purpose, responsibility and commitment. Secondly, they had a strong organisational capacity, including leadership and management and professionalism. Thirdly, all of the schools carried out their tasks with competence and confidence; all had organisational cultures or mind-sets that supported hard work, expected achievement and acknowledged success. And lastly, all had strong accountability systems in place which enabled them to meet the demands of external accountability, particularly in terms of Senior Certificate achievement (Bloch, 2009:138).

## 3. Research Aims

We need to understand more about both the causes of violence in South African schools and what might be done about it. The purposes of the project were six fold:

1. To elicit perceptions and experiences of learners, teachers, other school staff, governors and parents about school violence;
2. To categorise the types of violence that occur in South African schools both in terms of the nature of the violence and the actors involved;
3. To compare such perceptions, experiences and incidences across six provinces of South Africa;
4. To generate and assess quantitative and qualitative data and typologies of violence within the school environment which can be used for self-evaluation by a school;
5. To identify and evaluate measures and initiatives taken by schools and their communities to promote a violence-free or secure environment in the school; and
6. To investigate the extent to which violence is a barrier to learning.

## 4. Research Design and Methods

The study took place in six provinces – Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North Western and Western Cape. The research team from UNISA carried out just fewer than two hundred interviews with school governors, teachers, learners (both victims and perpetrators of violence) and support staff and over 1000 questionnaires were returned from grade 9 learners. In addition, two more intensive case studies were carried out in selected schools in KwaZulu Natal. I was not part of the team that carried out the empirical research. However, as I am an Honorary professor at UNISA, have previous experience of researching a violence reduction project in schools in the Durban area and have published reasonably extensively on the relationship between schools and violence generally, I was asked by Vusi to compile the overall report from the data sent in by the teams in the six provinces. The report contains a lengthy literature review detailing previous work on the nature, types and causes of violence schools both within South Africa and internationally.

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## 5. Research Findings

### 5.1 Positives

Not all schools in the interview sample reported a problem with violence. For example, these two learners from schools in North West Province said,

> "Madam this school is ok, it`s fun. The teaching Madam, the teachers are ok everything is ok. For me madam everything is ok" (learner North West).

Even in the largely urban province of Gauteng some learners reported low levels of violence,

> "Violence is not rife in my school; there are few incidents that are being reported now and then" (learner Gauteng)
> "Violence is not rife in my school" (Principal Gauteng).

### 5.2 Negatives

However, while these are positive examples, the majority of respondents did comment on incidents of violence in schools both in responses to the questionnaire and in the interviews. In relation to the questionnaires, 55% of learners responded that they had been victims of violence in schools. Results suggest that violence in schools has serious and negative consequences for school attendance, learning and achievement among a significant proportion of learners. Some types of violence that the study found to affect schools, for example Gangsterism, primarily originate outside the school as do the use of illegal drugs which facilitate violence.

However, even here it has to be asked if the problem is purely or solely external when some schools do not even have fences around them. As a learner in Western Cape said,

> "Fencing, that is the one thing and the fence is for our own safety and the safety of our teachers and if there is no fence we don't feel safe and we as learners feel that our safety has been taken away from us and which means our education cannot continue because if you sit in the class wondering what`s gonna happen, when is the gangster gonna come in and open fire on the learners that is what is going through our minds as learners and I think the fence play a big role in the safety of the learners and the teachers in our school, so that is one thing that must be changed at the school"

And is the problem of drugs purely external? Why do learners take drugs?

There are some interesting interview responses in this study that suggest that schools are failing to provide an environment that gives learners the feelings of security, confidence and sense of personal worth and well-being they need and as a result they resort to drugs,

> "Emotionally violence as I`ve said is when you as a person makes yourself a victim by disclosing yourself to an extent whereby you let teachers pick on you and label you. There shouldn`t be violence but because we are not being encouraged to be ourselves we turn to smoking dagga, vandalising the school in order to express ourselves. I`m not trying to shift the blame but as I said, if we are encouraged to be ourselves maybe there wouldn`t be such violence because everyone would be in their classes learning, but everyone is trying to avoid teacher X, because teacher X beats the hell out of you and teacher Y says some things that displease you and make you feel small…if you were encouraged to be yourself you wouldn't do that" (learner NWP).

Also, teacher absenteeism can be a factor in letting drug-related behaviour gets out of control: "*(As a result of drugs) Yes madam like if there is no teacher in the class, we kick and bang the doors and go*" (learner NWP).

However, the further bad news is that as schools are being affected by violence in the wider society, they are also involved in both reproducing and causing or perpetrating violence in South Africa. The study found considerable evidence that they do this in a number of ways:

- By not acting on reports of learner to learner bullying (see report);
- By teachers bullying learners;
- By failing to control sexual harassment by male learners or to attempt to male learners to think about different types of masculinity less based on sexual entitlement and violence;
- By teachers using verbal and physical violence towards learners, including corporal punishment;
- By poor levels of teacher professionalism such as absenteeism and lateness - the more disorganised,

unreliable and inconsistent the school is, the more chance of violence as learners feel that in a laissez-faire atmosphere anything goes and they too can do as they please; and

- By poor or weak school management - there can be a basic lack of respect and trust between learners and teachers. Many learners lack confidence in the school and teachers – they do not seem to be on the same side or a true educational community.

It is clear from the respondents in this study that all that is possible is not currently being done in relation to violence reduction in terms of codes of conduct, security, and consistency of application of rules or responding to learner needs and issues.

A resulting sense of anomie or lack of identity with the school can mean that learners even collaborate with criminals outside the school. But, paradoxically, this is also good news because if a considerable share of violence affecting schools originates within schools, then they can actually do something about it - schools are not necessarily helpless victims of a wider violent society.

## 6. The Way Forward

First, a well organised, inclusive and well-run school can do much to reduce the incidents and impact of external violence because learners and teachers are part of a community with a sense of purpose – there is something which people feel they belong to and which is worth protecting. Such a well organised school may well have a safety and security committee which makes sure that there are proper fences, locks and etcetera but its main strength is that loyalty and commitment to the school will reduce internal collaboration with potentially violent external individuals and groups.

As opposed to a dysfunctional or laissez-faire school, such external threats will be more readily noticed and acted upon in a cohesive way. Second, some 'external' threats are also partly internal. Some learner respondents reported that the failure of the school to recognise them as individuals or to provide self-esteem promotes their use of drugs. More obviously, schools are failing to deal with cases of bullying or sexual harassment even when they are reported to teachers. This is a case of violence by omission where schools knows that there is a problem of violence, of which the evidence in this study clearly suggests they do, and does little or nothing to try to prevent it.

One teacher even noted that the wider education system itself was partly to blame as many bullies were those that the system failed. As the report shows, these forms of violence in schools can have serious educational, medical, social and economic consequences for learners.

Such direct forms of violent behaviour by teachers demonstrate a serious problem of lack of professionalism, compounded by evidence in this report of teacher behaviour which also indirectly contributes to violence – teacher absenteeism and lateness.

In the report, there is also some evidence of schools' failure to take into account the individual needs of young people and to try to control them in a 'one size fits all', which can result in violent rebelliousness. However, ultimately it is the school management – the Principal, SMT and SGB – that is responsible for the day-to-day prevention of violence in schools and there is considerable evidence in the report that schools are not being managed sufficiently well to reduce violence.

The study also suggests that the role of the police in helping with violence in schools can be positive. However, it is currently haphazard and inconsistent – and in some cases non-existent.

It is also an interesting question of what role model some police provide in relation to violence. A key question stemming from this study that policy makers and educationalists will have to ask themselves in South Africa in terms of attempts to reduce violence in schools is whether they want to continue to go down a path which emphasises punishment, control and surveillance of learners (and staff) with, for example, even more frequent and sophisticated searches or will a path that improves teacher professionalism and the effectiveness of school organisation and culture be a better way to reduce school violence?

## 7. Recommendations and Conclusions

There are a number of recommendations that stem directly from the findings of this study. Current efforts aimed at increasing basic levels of good management, school effectiveness and teacher professionalism in South African schools need to be supported and enhanced as this will also have a beneficial effect on reducing school violence. A well-ordered school is also a less violent school. However, efforts must also increasingly be made to realise this within the post-apartheid educational framework of education for democracy and peaceful conflict resolution – an effective school must

also be a more democratic school; good management is more democratic management and a professional teacher operates in a more democratic manner. The more learners, parents and staff are involved in school policy and decision-making, the more there is a genuine community, the more the school can resist violence.

Initial teacher education needs to be more rigorous in producing professional teachers. Schools which experience problems of violence need an active safety and security committee which monitors violence, recommends violence prevention measures and oversees implementation. This committee would need to advise on the necessity for, appropriateness and consequences of, any searches for drugs and weapons among learners. Many teachers still need training on why corporal punishment is ineffective educationally and has negative consequences as well as constructive alternatives to it.

Bullying must be recognised as a problem and acted upon in schools by staff. Each school should have clear anti-bullying policy. The nature and causes of violence in society and in schools needs to be examined and discussed in schools and teacher education. The social nature of masculinity, and alternatives to aggressive and violent masculinity, needs to be examined and discussed in schools and in teacher education. The study found evidence of racial or ethnic conflict, including violence, in the Western Cape and there is a need, or a continuing need, for race and racism to be examined and discussed in schools and teacher education. There is a need to re-consider the place, nature and content of teaching about society in South African schools. Does Life Orientation as a school subject provide a suitable vehicle? Is a new approach based on social structures as well as individual needs and skills required? Are teachers equipped to teach controversial issues in the classroom?

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