Educators' Perceptions of Factors Contributing to School Violence in Alexandra

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Abstract

School violence continues to be highly prevalent in many low-income communities in South Africa. This study made use of an interpretive research paradigm to explore educators' subjective views of school violence in Alexandra. Participants were 12 educators at selected government schools with at least 5 years teaching experience. Individual interviews were carried out to explore these educators' experiences and subjective understandings of factors contributing to school violence. Thematic content analysis was used to report results at the individual, family, school, community and societal levels which educators perceived to play a role in school violence. At an individual and familial level age, mental health and child rearing arose as risk factors of school violence. Educators also signalled relational concerns within the institutional and leadership structures in schools as well as tensions between staff and learners as school factors. Whereas socio-political changes in South Africa, poverty, a lack of resources and the availability of illicit substances within the community were raised as community and societal risk factors for school violence.

Keywords: ecological approach; educators, interpretive research, low-income communities; prevention; school violence

INTRODUCTION

School violence is a widespread problem in South Africa (Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2009). Almost 1 in 4 learners, and 1 in 4 educators, have experienced violence on or near school premises (Burton, 2008). Moreover, 58.1% of educators and 85.5% of learners reported that they felt unsafe at school (Burton, 2008). With school violence becoming more commonplace, the impact on learners, educators and administrators is undoubtedly significant (Steffgren & Ewen, 2007).

Globally, there is a paucity of research on educators' experiences of violence at schools (Burton, 2008). In South Africa, existing research suggests that educators and other school employees may be at risk of theft, verbal threats, physical injury and psychological harm (Burton, 2008). Safety concerns may even lead educators to leave the profession altogether (Nesane Nesane, 2008). However, educators are not only potential victims of school violence, but may also be perpetrators. Educators may inflict harm on learners through corporal punishment, psychological maltreatment and sexual misconduct. Interestingly, educators as a group have been relatively understudied with regard to school violence (Fisher & Kettl, 2003).

Present-day school violence in South Africa must be understood with reference to the country's legacy of political struggle, as well as the associated economic disadvantage and social inequality (Vally, Dolombisa & Porteus, 1999). As a result, many schools still lack basic infrastructure and amenities, as well as sufficient numbers of educators (Phurutse, 2005). Schools located in low-income, violence-prone areas are particularly vulnerable to increasing rates of school violence. According to Burton (2008), a school based in a community that has "high crime rates, a neglected physical

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environment and a transient population is likely to be characterised by many of the same factors, and will constantly be fighting the encroachment of these characteristics" (p. 54). Within these communities, there may be several risk factors for school violence, including the presence of gangs and drug distribution networks (Elliot, 1994). High unemployment rates, and substandard school and housing facilities may also contribute to feelings of hopelessness among youth (Miller, 2008). Violence may become an expression of the anger, frustration and alienation that young people struggle with on a daily basis (Veltkamp & Lawson, 2008). The battle for survival in environments with high levels of poverty, violence and drug abuse may also preclude parents from having an interest in school matters thus extending the roles of educators to counsellors and caregivers, and some may misuse their power in these roles (Kamper, 2008).

This article discusses educators' views on the factors that contribute to school violence in selected secondary schools in Alexandra, near Johannesburg. Alexandra is a low-income area with poor infrastructure, overpopulation, vastly inadequate services and a multitude of social problems (Baskin, 2007). The data presented in this article are drawn from a broader study conducted by Pahad (2010) that also examined educators' experiences of school violence, the perceived impact of school violence on educators and educators' views on defining school violence. This study was conceptualised using ecological theory, which emphasises the role of inter-related ecological levels of influence in human development and experience (Visser, 2007). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), there is no single causative factor for violence, and violent acts are caused by the complex interaction of differing contributing variables and experiences (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). For this reason, Krug et al.'s (2002) adaptation of the ecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified environmental systems that frame all human transactions and influence human development: the micro-system (individual), the meso-system (familial), the exo-system (school and community), the macro-system (societal) and the chrono-system which takes into account history and time which shapes one's development. All of these ecological levels work in an inter-related manner. Hence, "a change in one part will cause a change in other parts" (Visser, 2007, p.104). This article focuses specifically on presenting the findings related to educators' perceptions of factors contributing to school violence within Alexandra secondary schools, with a particular focus on learner-on-learner violence and learner-on-educator violence. The study selected a qualitative design as most existing studies on this topic have used quantitative measures (see Burton, 2008; De Wet, 2007b; Du Plessis, 2008). This has led to a gap in understanding educators' subjective evaluations and experiences of school violence in this community. The article highlights educators' perspectives and discusses their broader implications for violence prevention within the school environment.

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design was used to understand how educators make sense of their experiences of school violence. Qualitative research demands that the data collected is rich in the description of experiences (Patton, 2002). In order to focus on the "meanings that particular experiences, events and states hold for participants" (Lyons & Coyle, 2007, p. 35), an interpretive approach was used.

PARTICIPANTS

Non-probability purposive sampling was utilised to 'handpick' participants on the basis of predetermined characteristics determined using the judgement of the researcher (De Vos, Strydom & Delport, 2005). According to Mertens (2005) the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in the choice of information-rich cases that best represents the population for in depth study. Data was collected from educators from several government schools within Alexandra, which were designated as 'underperforming schools' based on their matric pass rates. Participants selected were 12 educators with at least 5 years of teaching experience, of which 5 were male and 7 were female. Participants fell within a 30-60 year age range.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

This research was conducted in accordance with the protocols and procedures specified by the University of Witwatersrand Ethics Committee, the Department of Education and the Health Professions Council of South Africa. A letter was distributed to the principals of the selected schools explaining the nature of the study and seeking their permission to approach educators to request their participation in an interview. Once permission was granted from the relevant authorities, interested individuals were given an opportunity to volunteer to participate in the study. Convenient times and places for the interviews were then arranged with the participants. Interviews were conducted on the school premises, at the participant's home or a quiet place outdoors. One-hour individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants once informed consent and consent to record the interview were obtained.

Semi-structured interviewing is known for its capacity to gather a rich body of information through its flexible structure and interactive nature, which permit the interviewer to probe interesting points that arise, as well as track the participants' interests and concerns (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Questions were devised to tap educators' understandings of school violence and their opinions on school violence more generally, as well as violence against educators. They also addressed the educators' own experiences and accounts of school violence, their descriptions of incidents of school violence, their perceptions of factors associated with increasing the likelihood of school violence and their opinions about how school violence had affected them. Interview data was audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and then transcribed in preparation for the process of data analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

This study explores salient themes that emerged from the data using the method of thematic content analysis (TCA) described by Braun and Clarke (2006) to generate a concise, coherent, logical account of the participants' experiences through the development of themes and subthemes in the data. TCA usefully summarises key themes of a large body of data to offer a 'thick' description of its similarities and differences (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Kelly, 2006). The first phase of data analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) is the process of becoming familiar with the data through the process of reading and re-reading of the research transcripts. This is followed by the creation of initial codes reflecting potential patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Within this approach, codes are then sorted into broader themes. These themes were generated by the first author and then checked by the second author. Themes and sub-themes are then reviewed and refined, with a view to being organised and then reported according to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In using the data to build concepts related to understanding school violence, the research undertook elements of an inductive coding process (Merriam, 2002). However, the coding was also guided by deductively using a social ecological framework to organise the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants viewed school violence as a result of several points of 'damage' in the system, in which individual factors, familial factors, school factors, community factors and societal factors are inter-related influences. This section discusses educators' perceptions of factors identified at each ecological level that they perceived to contribute to school violence. Educators expressed their views about factors that contributed to various types of school violence, including the perpetration of learner-on-learner and learner-on-educator violence.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Krug et al. (2002) regard individual level causes of school violence as the "biological and personal history factors that an individual brings to his or her behaviour" (p. 12). Age, gender, attitude, mental health and substance abuse emerged as

individual factors that participants in the present study perceived to increase the likelihood of being a victim or perpetrator of school violence. There was consensus that violence within the school context was most often perpetrated by males.

> Particularly boys. With girls I'd never, I'd never [sic] experienced any violence (Participant 8)

Many participants viewed age as a risk factor for the perpetration of school violence among learners, and this risk was mostly associated with younger learners, or learners in lower grades.

> And if I may tell you, violent learners are learners from Grade 8 to Grade 9. From Grade 10, 11 and 12, yes very few learners are violent. (Participant 8)

Swart and Stevens (2002) similarly found that most reported incidents of school violence in the secondary schools they studied involved learners in Grades 8 and 9.

Age differentials between learners were another factor perceived by the participants in the present study as contributing to school violence. One educator explained that age differentials contributed to school violence because having learners of various ages in one class often made it more difficult to exercise control in the classroom. This was seen as a risk factor for both learner-on-learner violence and violence directed by learners towards educators.

> You teach different levels in one class...sometimes I can't control this [sic] older one...So the younger ones will take that [sic] advantage. I won't have control of the class. (Participant 5)

In terms of learner-on-learner violence, educators identified the younger learners to be most often involved in incidents of violence. Younger learners were most often identified as being both victims and perpetrators of school violence. However, they were viewed as most likely to be victims, as they were more susceptible to physical attacks and robbery. Furlong and Morrison (2000) found certain types of aggressive behaviours to be higher among younger high school learners (such as fighting) while weapon use and substance abuse seemed to occur during the later high school years. This suggests that maturing in age changes the behaviour learners engage in, and therefore the types of violence they are likely to enact.

> The participants in this research also viewed younger educators as being more likely to be victims or perpetrators of school violence. De Wet (2007a) similarly found that educators aged 30 years or younger had the highest incidence of verbal and physical learner-on-educator and educator-on-educator violence.

Another contributing factor to school violence perceived by the participants is the 'angry' attitude of the learner or educator. Participants expressed that frustrated and angry learners may develop the propensity for enacting violence towards learners or educators.

> Maybe he or she may have been in the same grade for three years then he ended up being confused [sic], don't know exactly why he was here [sic]...and sometimes the anger also comes in... not only is he angry over [sic] the other learners he may also be angry on [sic] teachers. (Participant 3)

Excessive or uncontrolled anger is a well-established risk factor for aggressive behaviour (Krug, et al., 2002). Several participants attributed violence by learners to be an expression of a negative attitude towards education. This attitude often left educators feeling frustrated and hopeless.

> Most of the time those learners who are bullying the others have no interest in education and stuff. They don't love education so they lack motivation... (Participant 10)

The attitude of learners was not only a contributing factor towards learner-on-learner violence, but was also seen by participants as a factor that contributed to learner-on-educator violence. The participants expressed the idea that educators were being victimised by learners through disrespect, rude behaviour, incomplete work or attributing blame for their problems to the educators. However, the behaviours depended on the individual's attitude as some individuals would physically fight whereas others would verbally abuse others.

Mental illness among learners was another individual level factor that participants viewed as contributing to school violence.

> A mental [sic] unhealthy learner is a danger to a society, not just a mentally unhealthy learner, an adult as well you know an an [sic] educator. We've seen, you know, fathers raping their kids. That is, that's a a serious mental [sic] unhealthy state you know...(Participant 10)

> Violence is a shortcut. When you hit someone, it just means that your mind has reached a wall. You can think anymore...So you, you, you [sic], but it also comes from the states of being mentally unhealthy, because if you if if [(sic] you are healthy mentally then you won't look for shortcuts. (Participant 6)

Mental illness was perceived to be a risk factor for the perpetration of violence by both learners and educators towards various groups within the school environment. A link between substance abuse and the perpetration of school violence against learners and educators was also raised. Participants described how the use of marijuana among learners would often result in other learners being robbed to sustain the habit.

> This learner do [sic] drugs but in most cases learners who do drugs, other ones who are problematic, yes they are very violent. I mean if you don't have money to buy drugs, what is he [sic] going to do? He has to rob other learners. (Participant 8)

At the same time, attempts at disciplining learners involved in drug use have led to educators putting themselves at risk of victimisation.

> [I] once felt unsafe here in school when I tried to prevent two boys when I found them smoking dagga [sic] (Participant 11)

Substance abuse among educators was also raised as a factor perceived as contributing to involvement in the perpetration school violence.

FAMILIAL FACTORS

The family has immense potential to shape an individual's behaviour and range of experience (Gorski & Pilotto, 1993). Participants in this study linked school violence perpetrated by learners against other learners and educators alike to various familial influences, including child rearing practices, domestic violence and a lack of parental involvement in children's lives. The participants emphasised that a lack of interest in parents rearing their children was contributing to a lack of respect for others. One participant explained parents' lack of interest in rearing to the belief that rearing was the work of educators and the school.

> We are frustrated with this violence because you know even this [sic] kids their moral behaviours [sic] it starts at home. This violence starts at home and if ever at home nothing is being done and we are waiting for the school to do something we won't end it [sic]. Because you know education starts at home. (Participant 5)

According to Krug et al. (2002) there is a strong link between violence in adolescents and poor attachment between parents and children. The nature and style of the parenting model can be as significant as the child's physical environment

(Burton, 2008). Some participants highlighted the importance of being raised with respect and discipline at home as a deterrent to violent behaviour.

> It goes back to the family issue to say how are they raising the learner cause [sic] now it's about respect, it's about respect. (Participant 3)

The influence of parental and familial relationships in contributing to school violence perpetrated by learners was reinforced by the participants' experiences of learners imitating the models of behaviour of their parents or family members.

> The gun belongs to his uncle, he has asked him to carry the gun for him and then he must take it home (Participant 2)

Several of the participants believed that learners perpetrating violence at school were reproducing the domestic violence that they witnessed at home.

> So that child he's got he's got anger...the father was hitting the mother yesterday. When she [sic] comes to school she [sic] doesn't talk to us. But deep down you can see that this child is not like [sic] yesterday. (Participant 5)

> Alexandra is a violent society, there's lots of rape, there's a lot of you know physical abuse at home... parents fighting each other. There was a learner in my class in Grade 8 who used to hit kids at the beginning of the year and I called him and I said, does you [sic], does your father hit your mother? You know he said no but then fortunately there is an educator who stays not far from the learner who knows, who knows the learner. And then the educator said the father hits the mother always you know so obviously [sic] that the learner will come to school and you know hit others (Participant 6)

Previous research has also suggested that constant exposure to violence, victimisation and criminal behaviour can predispose individuals to delinquency as well as an increased likelihood of victimisation in later life (Krug et al., 2002).

A lack of parental involvement also emerged in the participants' views of familial factors contributing to school violence. Participants suggested that parents do not care about their child's behaviour until their child has been involved in a serious incident.

> The school violence begins at home I would say. It's the parent...they won't even come to school, they don't attend parents meetings. They do not come to school when they are summoned if [sic] child does something drastically wrong. (Participant 9)

However, the unavailability of parents may be a result of work commitments or living arrangements, and many school-going children may also live in child-headed households. In contrast to the views that school violence was fuelled by a lack of parental involvement, some participants suggested that learners who were "overprotected" by their parents were more likely to carry out violence in schools as their parents were often in denial about their children.

> So most of the kids... are highly protected from [sic] home. Their mothers don't want to listen about what their kids are doing here at school [sic]...so sometimes the violence starts there because when you are here...you just say that I am going to treat you like other learners. (Participant 5)

Thus, the participants viewed both over-parenting and under-parenting as negatively impacting on learners' development and behaviour, and exacerbating the problem of school violence.

SCHOOL FACTORS

Participants raised poor management of the school as an important factor contributing to school violence. Participants suggested that there was favouritism when principals gave credit to individuals who were perceived as being undeserving; promoted people based on their qualifications rather than their perceived ability; or promoted them on the basis of their friendships. These findings suggest a lack of trusting, mutually respectful relationships between staff at schools, and between staff and management.

Blasé and Blasé (2003) defined favouritism as a level 1 form of aggression in a model of principal mistreatment of educators, where acts are indirect and comprised of moderate aggression (such as disregarding educators' emotional and physical needs).

> You find that the management favours a certain group of educators and others are not favoured. (Participant 4)

> That that's when the problem comes [sic]. Maybe and then you'll find the person with totally a degree [sic]. Then he's employed because he has a degree. But now when I'm going to class, now that particular person is not able to do that. (Participant 1)

One participant recalled an incident where he was violently removed from his office without any reason by the principal, however, on enquiry, was informed that he was disliked by the principal and thus moved. As Blasé and Blasé (2003) argue, this maltreatment could be categorised as a level 2 offence, which entails direct and escalating aggression (such sabotaging educators; making unreasonable work demands).

> I was forcefully removed by the principal without any apparent reason because when I questioned her, why are you taking me out of the office? She felt that she doesn't [sic] like me therefore I was moved out of my office. (Participant 4)

Other participants also revealed that educators often fought to gain positions of power or promotions by sabotaging them, destroying their reputation or making them really unpopular. Blasé and Blasé (2003) referred to this as a level 3 mistreatment resulting in direct and severe aggression (such as lying, threatening, unfair dismissals, harassment and racism).

> I think among teachers you might find that it is caused by the positions and staff, maybe if somebody feels that the principal favours the other person [sic] than me and therefore when they [sic] are interviews or there are provisional posts teacher X is preferred than [sic] teacher so and so [sic]. (Participant 2)

Contrary to this belief, a few participants felt that the school leadership structures provided educators with support when needed. This suggests possible polarisation in the relationships among staff and between staff and management.

Several participants felt there is nothing to protect the educators from school violence. Similarly other research has found that learners and educators felt alienated in schools with high levels of violence (Warner, Weist & Krulak, 1999). Participants also felt that the policies which advocate 'condoning' learners to the next grade, even when they are unable to cope, and the lack of involvement from the Department of Education, contributed to school violence.

> Not a single one does pass [sic] they they were been [sic] pushed by the department all the time when the analysis is done the rest of the results done [sic], they say you are underachieving forgetting the other ones who we been [sic] pushing these kids through. (Participant 12)

Support, support in in the terms of um having those policies, but we talk about physical support (Participant 12)

All of the participants raised dismal earnings as a primary reason for leaving the profession. Some participants even suggested that the meagre salary was a form of violence towards educators as it made them struggle to survive, reduced their worth as educators and generally was a marker of disrespect towards them; which led to disrespect from learners.

If you could go to any teacher and ask if I were to offer you a job now, even if I can give you R8 000 or R10 000 or whatever you are paid now would you quit...he'll [sic] say yes I can quit immediately because it's not safe, it's not nice anymore, the monies that we are paid it's not really enough.(Participant 2)

We need to earn and get that respect that we deserve as people that are working for people. As people that are contributing to the ethos or the community. But of late we do not really get that much. (Participant 2)

A shortage of school resources had led learners to fight over chairs in the past, a participant recalls, creating feelings of disappointment, frustration and decreased motivation in learners and educators. Many educators have chosen to leave the profession due to the lack of resources and the dramatic decrease in the performance of learners and schools (Kivilu, 2004).

Another cause for school violence is the lack of consequences for learners' criminal behaviour when they commit acts of violence at school.

You see these kids they do things big things, just like that one that happened... these weapons they do such things it um only ends here amongst us [sic]. (Participant 12)

This lack of consequences was often a result of a misconstrued understanding of 'ubuntu' that led to acts of violence not being reported to the police or dealt with internally within the school or education department.

...but I take it was um, it was solved internally, never went out [sic]. (Participant 12)

We were disappointed that the learner was not expelled from the system, he was not expelled from school. He was moved from that school to the other [sic] school. (Participant 8)

However, educators were required to report the violent behaviour of learners to the police; which they felt put them at great risk of victimisation for revenge attacks.

COMMUNITY AND SOCIETAL FACTORS

Participants criticised the community for not supporting the school in its efforts against school violence. One participant accused the community of contributing to the school violence directed against educators by overlooking learners' violent behaviour and not enforcing consequences for their actions. For example, one participant mentioned an incident where three learners had fired bullets at an educator and none of them received punishment for their behaviour.

The community tends they all turns [sic] a blind eye to those things...incident of the educator that was shot at I was very much [sic] shocked when I discovered that the parents when at the police station they wanted us to ensure that those learners are not locked in [sic]...[despite] the seriousness of the nature of the offence. (Participant 12)

One could then hypothesise that the lack of consequences or punishment would amplify school violence against educators. Inaction by the community was also found when learners bunked school and participated in substance abuse in full view of the community. This implied that the community was tacitly condoning their improper behaviour by assuming no responsibility.

> You see like when a kid jumps the wall we expect those adults to help us to bring them in, when these kids do some dagga smoking we expecting [sic] the community to help us to push them to [attend] school, or to report them. (Participant 12)

The issue of poverty within the community was also raised as a contributing factor to school violence when the inaccessibility of food was presented in the views of the participants as a source for violent behaviour to occur.

> Some other ones it's because of poverty. She never [sic] ate in the evening. She's not eating now. You know she is hungry. So when she sees other kids eating it affects her. (Participant 5)

De Wet's (2007b) study corroborated the findings of the participants above with the most frequently cited community causes of school violence.

Participants also highlighted the influence of the media, the outlook of the new generation, and the history of apartheid as societal factors that play a role in school violence. They felt that the learners' violent behaviours were often an attempt to replicate what they had seen on television. The participants viewed the media's portrayal of violent behaviour as a way to solve problems and encouraged young people to carry weapons and utilise violence as a means of protection.

> You see some other things are these movies that they see in [sic] TV. They also contribute because they want to be those people...but when they [sic] are at school sometimes she can act as if she's in the movie hitting other learners [sic]. You see... That violence then it erupts. (Participant 5)

Most evidence to date implicates exposure to violence on television in the increased likelihood of immediate aggressive behaviour, and longer-term serious violence (Krug et al., 2002). However, in recent years local media have attempted to empower victims by exposing perpetrators of violence. However, educators perceived that this has sometimes led to the persecution of and disrespect for ordinary, innocent educators.

> If a teacher has abused or touched or whatever a child at school, you know it's so exposed...[sic] teachers we used to be well respected...but of late you know the community has the audacity of coming to chant against the teacher. (Participant 2)

Participants felt there has been a drastic 'attitudinal' change in learners and that this change has led to disrespect for educators and education, thereby increasing risk of school violence to educators. The negative attitude towards educators also extends to the broader community.

> It has changed drastically. The kind of learners we have now, they just don't [sic] and there's very little learning going on in our schools. (Participant 9)

> In the olden days when I still [sic] when I started teaching there was no violence...but these years it has become worse and worse and worse every day and it is not a good thing. It puts educators' lives at risk. (Participant 8)

It was further alleged by the participants that learners were exploiting their newly gained rights to disempower educators which resulted in more educators leaving the profession.

> Their respect it's like...in this generation so [sic] they don't differentiate between them [sic] and the educators, it's like we are at [sic] the same age... we used to respect educators so [sic] these days it's no more... he'll say "educator I've got a right", you'll find out that he doesn't understand what that right means. (Participant 3)

> ...these children they've got all the rights even if they are wrong. They've got all the rights. At the moment the child can...abuse me...verbally abuse. There's no way I can go and report the child and the child cannot be chased

away from school because she [sic] has verbal [sic] abused me. But if a [sic] educator has a [sic] verbal abuse I can even be taken to court, I can even be chased [sic] away from teaching that is why it's one of the things that make [sic] educators to [sic] go away from teaching because they are not protected. (Participant 5)

Many participants felt that the violent history of apartheid and more recent societal changes affected levels of school violence in Alexandra. Vally *et al.* (1999) similarly argue that the high level of violence in schools reflects a complicated combination of past history and recent stresses at an individual, school, and community level in a society.

DISCUSSION

Research over the years has shown that violence is often a result of multiple factors that are interconnected (Astor et al., 1996; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Krug et al., 2002). This study similarly found that several inter-related factors which were located at the different levels identified within an ecological framework contributed to the risk of school violence in Alexandra. Socio-political changes in South Africa have brought benefits in education and have presented new challenges within the education sector. The present and historical social circumstances of Alexandra present this community with many challenges that contribute to greater risk of school violence. Widespread poverty, a lack of resources and the availability of illicit substances within the community place schools in a difficult position as many of these issues filter into risk factors for school violence. Educators signalled relational concerns within the institutional and leadership structures in schools. They also highlighted tensions in the relationships between staff and learners, as well as difficulty in the management of school-parent and school-community relationships. Moreover, a lack of human and material resources to effectively manage these challenges was raised. The perspectives of educators in the study also foreground the idea of how power and power imbalances within society and communities are interconnected with power relations within schools, and manifest in the relationships between different role players in the familial, educational and community spheres. Institutions, laws and ideologies are structures or mechanisms through which power is exercised in individuals who are able to exercise power over others (Foucault, 1982). Thus, the findings highlight the ways in which power inequalities in societies more broadly manifest in power struggles within different groups in communities, which in turn affect and are exercised within schools, and in turn affect families and individuals. The findings also point to the uses and abuses of power within relationships located at different levels of an ecological perspective on school violence and the role of the school as an institution through which power relations operate. They also highlight how frustrated power relations set the scene for the exacerbation of factors that may create conditions of risk for school violence. Disparities in power may expand or constrain the real-life choices and opportunities available to individuals, schools or communities in Alexandra, which may place them at risk for violence to be used as a means of expression of frustration, as a mechanism for trying to assert dominance or as a way to act on the actions of others.

This is a valuable finding as it not only provides some clarity on the factors that contribute to school violence, but also offers insights from educators about how they experience this violence first hand. Educators' views on the factors that contribute to school violence seem to be consistent with Bronfenbrenner (1979) who acknowledges the influence of the wider environment, societal ideologies and structures on human behaviour. Likewise, an inability to manage individual factors or intervene in family challenges often contributes to situations, which spill over into the school context and create strained relationships and power stand-offs between learners, parents, educators and the broader community.

Based on this study, it is recommended that more research on school violence in South Africa be conducted with particular focus on a community, school or issue. An important relationship that should be explored is the interpersonal relationship between educators and learners. As indicated by the ecological model, this relationship is crucial in the prevention of school violence and warrants further research, especially in South Africa. A better understanding of the

educator-learner relationship can have a tremendous impact on both learners and educators. In addition regular studies on the effectiveness of interventions, policies and administration of schools and the education system should be addressed so as to ascertain what is working and modify that which is not.

PREVENTION IMPLICATIONS

This study highlights that school violence needs to be addressed holistically, through interventions to target risk factors at different ecological levels. At an individual level, the gender of learners, learners in the lower grades and age differentials in classes were found to contribute to violent incidents in schools. In fact, the lower grade learners were reported as frequently involved in school violence. As a result, early intervention at younger levels for learners is suggested, preferably, by means of screening for learning difficulties and mental disorders (such as depression), and providing extra support for lower grades. Younger, more inexperienced educators also need support in managing difficult situations that could escalate into incidents of school violence. The problem of substance abuse also needs to be addressed at the level of the individual, but also in terms of the home, school and community influences.

The importance of healthy parenting styles and parental involvement were found to be crucial, at the familial level, in preventing acts of violence perpetrated by learners. Thus, by identifying at-risk individuals (learners and parents), support can be provided through after school programmes, parent support groups and new parenting workshops. These interventions should be targeted at strengthening the relationships between parents and schools to ensure that these are mutually supportive and not adversarial.

At the school level, there were several difficulties related to school management, as well as the relationships between schools and the Department of Education and between school principals and staff that have emerged as areas where intervention is required. Stable management structures need to be developed with education contexts, as well as the development of forums to create better communication between schools and the Department of Education on policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation. However, before this can happen, more research on effective violence prevention and reporting processes need to begin.

At a community level, the lack of support and social circumstances of the community (poverty and crime) were found to increase school violence. To address this, school activities (such as a food gardens, job creation efforts and skills development) are needed to enrich the community while building a connection between the community and the school. With regard to the societal influence, this study found that educators felt that disrespect from the new generation of learners due to their misunderstanding of their newly gained rights along with constant exposure to violence through the media definitely played a role in the risk of violent behaviour at school. Alongside this the violent history of Apartheid has implied that the use of violence as a means to find solutions is an acceptable practice. Consequently, there needs to be a re-examining of existing policies; the areas not being addressed or difficulties in policy implementation. A shift in thinking also needs to occur through consciousness raising campaigns, projects and programmes around violence, rights and education.

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