CREATIVE ACTION FOR CHANGE

Conference report: Strategies for non-violence in education

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There is ample evidence of the persistence of violence at all levels of the South African education system. Working on the assumption that change will require active collaboration across all sectors, three organisations held a conference in Durban to sustain work towards non-violence. This article reports the process of working from an understanding of the nature and extent of such violence to a review of current projects and programmes to address it, and finally to a collaborative process in developing strategies for change. Research presented gave considerable insight into how violence operates and how interventions can make a significant difference. Two key disconnects were identified – the gap between the values advocated in policies and those actually experienced, and the failure to see humans as simultaneously physical, spiritual, emotional and cognitive. Learners challenged the practice of tolerating violence as a norm and insisted on the right to learn in conditions of safety. Practitioners demonstrated a range of innovative interventions through presentations and experiential learning. The strategies placed strong emphasis on ways of fostering positive values and ethical behaviour in education, and on promoting the many ways in which people can take creative action for change.

It is becoming increasingly clear that most of the direct or physical violence experienced in developing countries is not the result of civil wars between governments and their opponents. The reports of the Human Security Report Project[1] clearly show that such wars have decreased significantly in number and intensity over the past two decades. In much of sub-Saharan Africa most violence occurs in households and communities, mainly perpetrated by husbands, fathers and young men against women and girls. South Africa fits this pattern. Even though there is no civil war, and limited violence from organised crime and gangs, it is one of the world's most violent countries, ranked 15th in the world in terms of its homicide rate per 100 000 people by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime,[2] and eighth in terms of violent deaths per 100 000 according to the Geneva Declaration on Armed Conflict.[3] It is frequently referred to as the 'rape capital of the world', with 50 000 to 55 000 rapes and attempted rapes reported to police each year – and these are regarded as being just the tip of the iceberg. A respected estimate by Gender Links and the Medical Research Council[4] indicates that only one in 25 victims actually reports to the police. A nationally representative survey of 1 738 African males in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape by Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell & Dunkle[5] reported disturbingly high levels of rape. Over 40% said that they had been physically violent to an intimate partner, and 14% said that this had occurred within the last year.

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South Africa's schools mirror the intense violence in wider society. The 2012 National School Violence Survey (NSVS),[6] a nationally representative survey carried out in 121 high schools among 5 939 learners, 121 principals and 239 educators, found very high levels of violence experienced by learners, ranging from assaults to threats and sexual assaults. Educators were also victims of violence. More than half reported being verbally abused by learners, 12,4% had been subject to physical violence and 3,3% had been sexually assaulted. A further study, the *Dynamics of violence in South African schools* (DVSAS)[7] investigated 24 schools across six provinces. This indicated that 55% of learners stated that they had experienced violence, with 28% noting that this violence was a daily occurrence. Not surprisingly, schools were generally regarded as places of fear and apprehension.

One of the significant papers that influenced the conference organisers was Adams's work on 'chronic violence', which affects about a quarter of the world's population and which she defines using three dimensions of 'intensity, space and time':

- Rates of violent death are at least twice the average for the country income category
- These levels are sustained for five years or more
- Acts of violence not necessarily resulting in death are recorded at high levels across several socialisation spaces, such as the household, the neighbourhood *and the school*,[8] contributing to the further reproduction of violence over time[9]

South Africa clearly fits this definition and manifests another central aspect of chronic violence – that it becomes accepted and 'normalised'. In Adams's words, 'When people are dominated by chronic fear or repression, the differences between right and wrong, the innocent and the criminal, the moral and the immoral, become blurred'.[10] Indeed, South African learners generally come from violent environments. Almost half the respondents in the 2012 NSVS[11] agreed that 'crime is a problem in my neighbourhood' and more than a third had seen a fight in their neighbourhood in the previous month. 10,9% had been assaulted at home in the last year and 59,7% of these victims had been assaulted more than once. Almost a quarter had siblings who had been imprisoned for criminal offences and almost 10% of their parents or caregivers had been imprisoned.[12]

There was also evidence cited in the study[13] that those learners who had been victims of violence or who had friends who were engaged in violence-related behaviour were more tolerant of violent behaviour. Exposure to violence seems to encourage such tolerance '… which has a significant bearing on the later perpetration of violent and aggressive behaviours'. It was facts and insights such as these that led us to organise the Strategies for Non-Violence in Education Conference, held at the Durban University of Technology from 1 to 3 July 2013.[14] The 100 or so participants came principally from academia and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with some representation from national and provincial departments of Basic Education. Fifteen high school students from two rural KwaZulu-Natal high schools and a township school also attended, and provided invaluable insights from their perspective.

The conference was organised around three themes – understanding violence in education, current actions against this violence and developing a strategy for building non-violence. This article provides an overview of the main insights that emerged under these themes, with reference to the papers/presentations made at the conference. A list of the papers presented is included in the endnotes of this article.

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE IN EDUCATION

Our knowledge of the nature and extent of violence in education is taken from three sources – previous studies, in particular the 2012 NSVS and the 2013 DVSAS studies, presentations at the conference, and the key issues that arose from the nominal group technique, described in detail in section four. The NSVS and the DVSAS studies, as we have seen, provide unequivocal evidence that violence is endemic in South African schools. Learners who attended the conference were adamant about two types of violence in schools, the first being the use of 'power over' learners by teachers, particularly male teachers. This was exemplified by the widespread use of corporal punishment by teachers and the creation of a climate of repression and fear. As one learner put it, 'How can we learn when we are always frightened?' Corporal punishment was made illegal in 1996; despite this, it is still prevalent in schools. The NSVS found that just under half the learners said they had been caned or spanked by an educator or principal;[15] the DVSAS study found that 41% of learners who reported corporal punishment said that they had been injured, and a significant proportion had gone to a clinic or hospital for treatment. The issue of corporal punishment is one we return to below.

The second type of violence was gender-based violence by male learners against female learners, which ranged from uninvited and unwanted comments to rape. Girls cannot understand why so many boys treat them in such disrespectful and threatening ways. These issues were discussed in conference presentations by Mulumeoderhwa[16] and Van der Walt.[17] Recent research in KwaZulu-Natal by Sathiparsad[18] and Mulumeoderhwa and Harris[19] has found that many boys hold attitudes which make them feel entitled to expect sexual favours from their girlfriends and that force is justifiable if the girl refuses without good reason. As Msibi[20] reported, this form of masculinity is responsible also for homophobic violence in township schools. Of major concern is the role of teachers in promoting homophobia, and the threats of rape against lesbian learners.

Morojele[21] further explored the role of gender relations in fostering violence in South African schools. In particular he found that young people (including girls) use language that is inherently derogatory of girls and humiliates them, both for being sexual and for not meeting the standards of heterosexual attractiveness. Language is used similarly against sexual minorities; in both cases language serves to normalise violence.

Violence extends to tertiary institutions, as noted in the presentation by Collins,[22] Gordon[23] and Du Randt,[24] who conducted research among female students in residence at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This study showed that violence is the norm for the vast majority of those with boyfriends. Violence took the form both of forced sex and common assault by male partners against their girlfriends. A variation on this theme is that many males in positions of power – academics, Student Representative Council (SRC) members and security staff – constantly use their positions to try and secure sexual favours from female students.

The issue of power is a major cause of gender violence. Those in power – very largely men – do not want to hear stories of gender violence. Incidents are hushed up and glossed over, thus effectively silencing the victim. Collins *et al* asserted that the executive of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, for example, has refused to acknowledge the endemic violence against females in residence, preferring to focus their concerns on preventing the relatively infrequent breaches of the university's security by outsiders.

Hemson's presentation[25] posed the question as to why the very high levels of violence in the last days of apartheid had not declined with democracy, and examined this at both a societal and personal level. Changing from non-violence requires unlearning some of what we have learnt from our social norms.

Lamb and Snodgrass's presentation[26] reported a study of young adults' narratives in the Eastern Cape that revealed how 'embedded and normalised violence is in their lives – in their homes, schools and neighbourhoods.' They described the destructive influence of patriarchal attitudes that condone violence against girls but also that of fathers against boys. The problem is less that of criminal intent than a result of the 'dominant discourse of violence'; they argue for strategies to build the self-esteem and resilience of young people. Similarly, Tschudin's[27] presentation reported research on how early childhood development experiences are critical to shaping subsequent life trajectories; he gave examples of violent language and actions carried out by very young children in school and pointed to ways in which these youngsters were themselves victims of violence.

Part of the problem that confronts us is that people who denounce violence often advocate further violence as a solution. This entrenches the norm that violence is the only solution, or perhaps a necessary evil. Harris's presentation[28] addressed the question as to whether violence is necessary because it 'works'. The research literature shows with remarkable consistency that the use of violence has far fewer positive outcomes than peaceful approaches. Corporal punishment in schools is a particularly relevant case. While many believe that discipline is not possible without it, Harris presented the considerable evidence of its association with negative outcomes for young people and also in their lives as adults. For example, children subjected to parents' corporal punishment were consistently more likely to be aggressive as children and were more likely to have mental health problems, both as children and as adults.

With respect to values and prejudice, Kaye[29] discussed the Bahá'í perspective that a peaceful world is not only possible but also inevitable as humanity adopts beneficial values, applicable to individuals and society as a whole. 'Development, in the Bahá'í view, is an organic process in which "the spiritual is expressed and carried out in the material."'[30] When constructive values and morality cease to form the standards of human behaviour, we see the breakdown of societies. This allows for the spread of prejudices, hatred, jealousy, etc., which become the dominant attitudes and practices in those societies. Violence not only becomes normal but takes the form of extremes, such as horrifying cases of child abuse.

The ways in which violence becomes normalised and values distorted was a key theme in the conference. The problem is not one of the formal curriculum. What emerged clearly in this part of the conference was the way that violence in South African education is fuelled by the disconnect between ethical and progressive policies and curricula on the one hand, and corrosive values and practice on the other. Violence can become the norm in some schools, just as it is in broader society. Nonetheless, some schools do succeed in developing norms and values of acceptance and safety.

The young people present were insistent on the need for safety in their schools as an essential condition for learning to take place. Thus, the challenge confronting us was to provide a positive answer to the question: how can schools be harmonious and peaceful in violent, disunited communities?

CURRENT ACTIONS AGAINST VIOLENCE

This section records and analyses the conference presentations related to taking action against violence, with the purpose of demonstrating the potential for linking different actors and different interventions in a coherent way. A patchwork of presentations and workshops addressed interventions at different points; they were intentionally diverse, presenting a broad range of projects aimed at peacebuilding. The experiential learning approach fostered lively discussions among the conference participants.

The report distinguishes here between societal, community, relationship and individual approaches, following the approach of Dahlberg and Krug.[31] Situating each presentation or initiative in this way enables one to see the need for work in one level to be complemented by work in others. The framework suggests that no one approach will be sufficient if it focuses on only one level; in the context of the conference, the question arose about whether the potential exists for different interventions to gain in effectiveness by the 'vertical' crossing of different levels as well as the 'horizontal' links across a level.

Societal level

Mannah's presentation on behalf of the Department of Basic Education (DBE)[32] addressed the responsibility of the whole education system, and thus spans both societal and community levels. The DBE approach has been to address the whole school in the context of its links to families and communities. A central intervention has been the establishment of Safe Schools Committees, involving the police and parents as well as the school itself. There are also proactive programmes to reduce the likelihood of violence, and systematic responses to recommendations of the NSVS. In recent years the levels of violence seem not to have changed; the question that arises is not about the commitment of the department, but rather whether the measures being undertaken are sufficiently vigorous or sufficiently directed to address the factors that perpetuate the norm of violence.

Kemp[33] advocated the use of school social workers and explained how their role is different to that of educators within the schooling system. The social worker has the responsibility to seek to understand the root causes of violence and to frame programmes that address these in the context of the school. Her argument is that this role is a critical element in a system that works to reduce violence.

Community level and relationship level

The bulk of the presentations focused on interventions that address the school or university community, or teachers or students within the school. The major emphasis fell on changing the culture of the community and on developing positive relationships.

John[34] presented research that engaged teachers and students separately in the process of mapping places of conflict and violence in schools. The study revealed how far apart perceptions were as to the reality of violence; comparison of the maps exposed 'blind spots' teachers had given no attention to. This process then enabled the teachers to design peacebuilding interventions within the school.

Gould[35] reported on the Seven Passes Initiative, an intervention that spans more than one group of stakeholders in developing relationships beyond the school, including focused academic support for young people. This presentation also addressed the challenging area of parenting practices. The empirical study related to the Initiative revealed highly inconsistent parenting, both positive and negative, that correlates highly with the behaviour of children. This study is informing the design of an intervention to address parenting practices over a three-year period. Kimbuku[36] also argued for a change in community practices in a paper that proposed the use of restorative justice approaches to discipline.

Several presentations dealt with the work of clubs among learners. Soul City[37] reported on the 6 000 Buddyz Clubs that work with youngsters in schools in a participatory way, with a range of activities designed to build social competence and confidence. The DVSAS study[38] reported on the positive impact of such work in a particular school. Similarly, Alty[39] spoke on school Peace Clubs that involve students with teacher oversight, and address ways of handling conflict and challenging social issues.

January's[40] presentation addressed both individual and societal levels, exploring the key elements of a Bahá'í-inspired curriculum for moral development that addresses both cognitive and affective learning. It emphasises constructive peer learning in a small group facilitated by an older youth who serves as a facilitator or mentor to the group. In such an environment, young people feel free to discuss their experiences, problems and aspirations. One of the core values adopted by the group is that of service to the community. Each group decides on a service project that they plan and conduct. Fudu[41] gave a workshop that demonstrated how such groups function in practice. It is a grassroots effort, as participation is voluntary and plans emerge from the groups' discussions.

Several papers addressed ways of responding to violence at universities. Duma[42] proposed a four-step approach to addressing sexual violence, drawing also on Dahlberg and Krug's model to identify different interventions for different levels. Collins[43] drew on an analysis of violence in residences to argue that approaches based on more effective security technologies and prosecutions were failing. While incidents of violence perpetrated by outsiders are well reported, there is massive under-reporting of violence happening inside the university in interpersonal relationships, in particular with sexual coercion and partner abuse. He advocated directing attention to how violence is normalised, and how perpetrators often hold social and institutional power. The discourse of violence as necessary and inevitable can be challenged through proactive interventions and through building participatory democracy. The core academic training of all students should include a focus on how relationships of power are caught up with exploitation, abuse and violence, and how people can work to create relationships of non-violence.

Chirambwi and Matunda[44] reported on the use of campus dialogue, a process that has succeeded in reducing violent conflict within a Zimbabwean university since it started in 2010, and is now spreading to other institutions. They identified a range of drivers of the violence, and discussed how the approach enabled communication between a range of stakeholders who then addressed various factors together.

At the other end of the education system, Kaya and Padayachee's[45] presentation on indigenous knowledge systems outlined how values such as ubuntu can be communicated through a range of cultural tools suitable for early childhood development.

A group led by Odendaal[46] held a workshop demonstrating the Alternatives to Violence Project, which uses participatory methods to educate on conflict transformation. This approach was explored further by Stanford Jarvis, who examined the significance and effectiveness of the affirmation exercises undertaken by participants in the Project.

Individual level

Four presentations addressed the individual as the person at the centre of change. In this approach, change towards non-violence begins with one's ability to address one's own consciousness and behaviour. Jevan's *Bringing about change*[48] focused on one's sense of self and how it is necessary to start with the self if one is serious about addressing violence. Similarly, Pillay's workshop[49] dealt with looking inward as a way of resolving fear and its resulting violence. Keats-Morrison[50] presented her work with young people, including offenders, using activities that draw on the capacities of the right brain. Partab[51] reported on the use of applied drama as a vehicle for addressing fear and trauma among young people. Finally, Dlamini[52] reviewed the range of different programmes, and argued that educational institutions need to draw on these resources in developing a nonviolent education system.

In his keynote address, Soudien[53] spoke about a man who had been in prison for murder, and who is now a peaceable community leader. A key element in this man's ability to change, he indicated, was the development of a wider repertoire of responses to stressful situations. Education that fulfils the basic task of teaching young people to think, and to develop greater awareness of their actions and their impact, serves to reduce the likelihood that they might turn to violence.

In reflecting on the range of presentations, we were struck by their diversity. While there was good evidence that constructive acts do contribute to transformation, we noted that approaches that take a more holistic approach have a better chance of success. This includes such examples as the Bahá'í initiatives that address both cognitive and affective issues, and address life both within and outside schools, or programmes that address the relationship of parents to schools. One of the approaches not reported at the conference, the Bambanani Safer Schools initiative,[54] starts from the recognition that schools are not islands but are always embedded in specific community contexts, and that interventions must address these relationships.

In contrast, some interventions may work well at the individual or group level, but fail to have an influence beyond those directly involved, unless they address structures and relationships in the community as a whole. Furthermore, while political leadership can address policy, there was ample evidence at the conference of the ways in which policy is impeded by individual or community resistance, or passivity or inaction, leading to major problems of implementation.

If this analysis is correct, there is a major need to carefully link the different resources that are available. Adams,[55] in referring to action to reduce the chronic violence of societies like South Africa, writes of the need to address it through inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary approaches. One rationale for this conference was exactly that: the development of collaboration across sectors. Since the conference we have learnt how some participants have started to work with one another, making more effective use of the limited resources available. Another rationale for the conference was to enable participants to develop a much more comprehensive understanding of the nature of violence and of the possibilities of mobilising against it in many diverse ways, thus building both imagination and hope.

A STRATEGY FOR NON-VIOLENCE

The third day of the conference was devoted to developing strategies. We decided to use a nominal group technique,[56] as it combined individual reflection and group consultation. A nominal group technique has been defined by several authors as the means of encouraging a group to develop a plan that the majority support. The process usually begins with the group facilitator presenting the problem to a small group of six to ten people. Each person then silently writes down his/her thoughts and ideas. The second phase is a round-robin where each person, in turn, presents one of his or her ideas. At this time there is no discussion; each point is written up so that everyone can see it. If two people have the same idea, the facilitator writes it only once, unless it is a variation of the idea. This continues until all the ideas have been noted. The third phase allows for discussion, explanation and expanding the idea. Finally, each person silently votes and ranks five ideas from highest to lowest. The votes are tallied and the highest-ranked ideas become the group's decision.

The conference participants were divided into groups, with each group identifying the most important points of a strategy. The question posed was 'What are the key elements of a strategic plan to reduce violence in schools?' We found that the nominal group technique was more effective than that of brainstorming, as it gave everyone the opportunity to participate (with brainstorming a group can often be dominated by one or two individuals). The opportunity for reflection at the beginning gave everyone time to think about the previous two days and to note what each person considered as the most important themes and ideas. Each group developed its own list of five points. We then presented each group's points in plenary. Although the groups approached the task differently, there were several repeating themes, discussed below.

Conscientiation and (re)training: Learners and teachers must firstly understand the destructive influence of violence on all stakeholders, whether victim, perpetrator, or observer. Conceptual understanding alone is insufficient without concurrent skills training. The form that such training could take is a series of seminars or workshops. For example, there is good evidence that youth empowerment groups are proving to be effective, as they provide a safe environment for youth to discuss this issue, the challenges they face, and steps that they can take irrespective of initial adult support. The inclusion of peace education in the curriculum would be a positive step towards re-education and training.

Advocacy, protection and confrontation of the issue: Groups of any combination – parents, learners, community, teachers – must pressurise school councils to provide adequate education and a clear, safe structure for reporting and supporting victims. All stakeholders need to know the process of reporting, the consequences of violent acts, and why eliminating silence is a powerful method of reducing violence. The groups proposed a range of methods to encourage speaking out, for example telling life stories in safe settings, and writing. The two issues of advocacy and protection are interlinked as they create an environment of intolerance for violence. Youth advocates, once empowered, can transform very adverse situations.

Ethical and moral behaviour: The need for ethical and moral behaviour must be applied firstly to teachers, principals and school councils – all those in a position of authority in the school. Given the clear evidence of widespread abuse of learners in the form of corporal punishment and sexual harassment, there are profound ethical concerns, let alone legal issues. Processes that enable educators to rethink their ethical responsibilities are essential. Without trust, learners are not safe nor are they being provided with positive role models. Training could include workshops on conflict resolution and on the meaning of sexual harassment. Although appropriate policies are in place, teacher accountability is essential.

Student life: In some areas, there is little to do after school, thus more constructive activities – cultural, clubs, life skills, training in collaborative methods – would provide positive alternatives. These could counterbalance boredom, inactivity, or the base excitement of conflict.

Understanding the causes: Poverty is rife in South Africa, and the conditions at some schools extremely poor. These can demotivate learners as they are in an environment that implies that they are unimportant, and that there is little value in human life. Furthermore, as home and community are sources of violence, normalisation becomes the standard, with both communities and families not acting to prevent violence. A further deterioration of relationships in the family, community and school poses great challenges for learners.

Strategy: The participants decided that an effective strategy would be to first develop indicators that could be used to measure a school's capacity to reduce school violence. These indicators could help with the school conducting an initial 'peace audit', and subsequently, with the data collected from the peace audit, to develop a pilot project at a school that meets the standards identified as necessary to reduce school violence.

CONCLUSIONS

Our thoughts:

- Our first conclusion was that the conference was not only planning for non-violence, but is itself working for non-violence. Drawing together diverse groups of people with a common interest in education in a way that communicates respect across difference, and developing a sense of a common mission, is part of what needs to be done.

- While top down direction and support are valuable, the solutions must be more holistic. That is, the school governing councils, principals, educators and learners in individual schools need to decide how they want their school to be, and to take the appropriate action. They may well have to do this without much initial support from the local community or from government.

- There is a glaring disconnect between the values spelt out in policy documents and implicit in the formal curriculum, and the values that become obvious from the 'hidden curriculum' of educational systems. We need to organise to expose and challenge the practices that permeate so much of South African education, and hold individuals responsible for their moral and ethical behaviour.

- The usefulness of action was a recurring theme throughout the conference. Even the most modest project aimed at reducing violence had positive outcomes. This led participants to develop a strategic plan that took each individual school as a starting place to incorporate the points raised by the papers and by the nominal group discussions.

- Teacher education is failing in its task of addressing the ethical behaviour of pre-service and in-service teachers. Despite policy, teacher education seems to have been reduced largely to purely cognitive and technical issues, leading to an impoverished sense of teacher identity.

- Poverty, inequality and poor quality of education in the country are some of the contributing factors to school violence. Youths understandably want material goods and in some cases have role models who value amassing wealth, no matter how acquired. This provides an imbalanced understanding of human nature, the goal of life and the role of community. People are not simply physical; constructive societies are built both upon values and on having basic needs met.

- We were struck by the significant role played by young people at the conference. There was a sense of youthful action that extends beyond resistance to creative ways of handling relationships in schools, thus bringing about positive change.

- We recognise the long history of violence and the ways in which its normalisation continues to inform 'solutions' to the problems of South African society. Challenging the discourse of violence requires actions across a range of sites; we emerged with a stronger sense of how that might be possible.

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