

# School violence in Lesotho: the perceptions, experiences and observations of a group of learners

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*School violence is a subject of great public and media interest that has stimulated a comprehensive body of research. Academic consideration of the subject began in the USA and Scandinavia in the mid-1960s and early 1970s but little evidence could be found of publications on the subject in the small landlocked Kingdom of Lesotho. To address this hiatus in school violence literature, I report on an investigation into a group of Lesotho secondary school learners' perceptions, experiences, and observations of school violence. The research instrument was an adapted version of a violence and trauma questionnaire for adolescents. The first important result from this study was to confirm that verbal and physical abuse amongst learners was prevalent in some schools in Lesotho. Secondly, qualitative and quantitative data revealed that learners often suffered verbal and physical humiliation at the hands of their educators. Thirdly, the data indicated that two major violence risk factors, namely, use of drugs and weapon carrying, were relatively common amongst educators and learners in Lesotho. This study also showed that school violence in Lesotho was a manifestation of gender inequality and violence. Some comments and recommendations are made.*

**Keywords:** aggression; gender inequality; learners; Lesotho; school violence

## Introduction and statement of the problem

Schools should be relatively safe places. According to research, fewer than one learner in two million suffers a school-associated violent death (Rabrenovic, Kaufman & Levin, 2004:115). Nonetheless, violent incidents and fear of violence have a profound effect on the educational process. Schools with high rates of crime and violence are less effective in educating learners. These schools have lower levels of learner achievement, higher rates of absenteeism, and more dropouts. Even in schools where a low percentage of learners are victimised, a few violent acts may have far-reaching detrimental effects for a large number of learners. Fear of victimisation has been found to inhibit learners' educational and psychological development (Cox, Bynun & Davidson, 2004:134). School violence breeds school violence. Cognisance in this regard should be taken firstly of Marshall's (2000:133) analysis of the reasons for the Columbine High School (Littleton, Colorado) attacks. According to her, learners who are picked on, made fun of, ostracised, harassed, and generally shamed, humiliated and targeted by fellow learners over a period of years may "... build up anger and hatred that finally explode into physical violence". Secondly, O'Keefe (1997, Daane, 2003:25) found that exposure to community and school violence alone, is sufficient to predict aggressive behaviours in boys. For girls, only exposure to school violence was a significant predictor of

aggression. School violence not only has immediate negative effects, but often persists into adulthood and supports an intergenerational culture of coercion and violence (Erickson, Mattaini & McGuire, 2004:102). Stein (2001:1) furthermore found that schools, through the “culture of silence” with regard to gendered violence, may well be “the training grounds for sexual and domestic violence”.

School violence is not a new phenomenon. In France, some learners went to school armed in the seventeenth century; they feared both their fellow learners and the community. Sword and fist fights, unrest and attacks on educators were not unknown in seventeenth-century French schools (see Hyman & Snook, 1999:6-8, for a brief historical overview of school violence in Europe and the USA). School violence is a subject of great public and media interest. Research has been stimulated and intensified by this public attention. It is therefore not strange to find that there is a comprehensive body of research into violence in schools. From the literature (Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty & Astor, 2005:165; Weir, 2005:1291; Erickson *et al.*, 2004:102-116; Mitchell & Mothobi-Tapela, 2004:8; O Agu, Brown, Adamu-Issah & Duncan, 2004:14; Klewin, Tillmann & Weingart, 2003:869-877; Nairn & Smith, 2003:133-149; Sercombe, 2003:25-30; Netshitahame & Van Vollenhoven, 2002:313-318), school violence appears to be a problem in the Scandinavian countries, as well as in, among others, Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Germany, Canada, Ghana, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Whereas academic consideration of the subject began in the USA and Scandinavia as long ago as the mid-1960s and early 1970s (Klewin *et al.*, 2003:876), little evidence could be found of publications on the subject in the small landlocked Kingdom of Lesotho.

In order to address this hiatus in school violence literature, I report on an investigation into a group of Lesotho secondary school learners’ perceptions, experiences, and observations of school violence, focusing on the following problem questions:

- What are Lesotho learners’ experiences as victims and/or witnesses of learner and educator violent behaviour?
- What are Lesotho learners’ perceptions of the prevalence of learner and educator violence and violence-related behaviour?

### **What is school violence?**

There is no clear definition as to what constitutes school violence. According to Furlong and Morrison (2000:71) “... school violence is a multifaceted construct that involves both criminal acts and aggression in schools, which inhibits development and learning, as well as harming the school’s climate.” Rabrenovic *et al.* (2004:116) comment that in this view, such violence may consist of anything from antisocial behaviour, to bullying, to criminal behaviour, including theft, assault, and even murder which may occur in classrooms, the hallway, the school yard or on school buses. Though not considered violent behaviour, minor acts of aggression in the playground often

escalate into major incidents of violence between learners at school. Although aggressive behaviour may not always lead to physical injuries, it is often associated with the risk of injury, intimidation, and threats and perceptions of fear and vulnerability (Rabrenovic *et al.*, 2004:116). According to Klewin *et al.* (2003:863-864), the academic debate on violence in schools is, to a large extent, concentrated on three clearly distinguishable categories of behaviour by learners:

- *Physical compulsion and physical injury.* This category always involves conflict between two or more individuals in which at least one side uses physical means (bodily force or weapons) to cause intentional harm, or at least threaten such harm, to the other side. In these cases, the harm itself is also physical in nature: the spectrum ranges from a slap in the face or a box on the ears, through broken bones to life-threatening injuries and even killing.
- *Verbal aggression and mental cruelty.* This category involves the marginalisation or degradation of an individual by the use of insults, humiliation, or emotional blackmail.
- *Bullying.* This term refers to a special variation of violence, encompassing both the physical and mental components. It involves a victim/perpetrator relationship, in which the weaker individual is regularly taunted and oppressed. Bullying takes many different forms: physical and verbal attacks play a part, as do indirect strategies (such as exclusion from the group, the spreading of rumours). At the same time, however, this means that bullying by no means encompasses all acts of violence in school: an outburst of aggression by a learner cannot be classified as bullying, any more than can a fight between two opponents of approximately equal strength.

Leach (2003:389) found that sexual abuse and violence are inextricably linked to other forms of physical violence in school, in particular to widespread bullying by learners and corporal punishment by educators and also to verbal abuse. It is therefore imperative that a study on school violence probe the question of gender-based violence. The following definition clearly states the social dimensions and root causes of violence against women and girls:

Gender-based violence is violence involving men and women, in which the female is usually the victim; and which is derived from unequal power relationships between men and women. Violence is directed specifically against a woman because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately. It includes, but is not limited to, physical, sexual and psychological harm (including intimidation, suffering, coercion, and/or deprivation of liberty within the family, or within the general community). It includes that violence which is perpetrated or condoned by the state (UNFPA Gender Theme Group, 1998, in Interactive Population Centre s.a.:4).

Sercombe (2003:28) observes that violence in schools is not just about learners carrying weapons, about bullying or about educators being beaten

up by learners. It is also about the

dark sarcasm in the classroom, about the threats, about leaving the student ignored in the corner for months on end, about getting rid of a student, hounding him/her until he/she leaves or is suspended, about insults, put-downs and spite, and about classifying a young person as a 'troublemaker' or a 'no-hoper', knowing that the student is being harmed.

Against the background of the aforementioned exposition, school violence may simply be described as educators and/or learners intent on harming other educators and/or learners. As set out in the introduction, the aim in this article will therefore be to investigate, not only learner-on-learner and learner-on-educator violence, but also educator-on-learner violence in secondary schools in Lesotho. Attention will however not be given to bullying as a subset of school violence.

### **Schooling in Lesotho**

Since 1833, when they arrived, missionaries have played a key role in the provision of education in Lesotho. They introduced formal institutions where instructions were given in classrooms. The churches currently own and operate over 90% of the schools in Lesotho. The government pays the salaries of more than 95% of all educators (Mturi, 2003:493). Whilst the management of the schools is largely in the hands of the church, the Ministry of Education and Training determines educational policy in line with Article 28(a) of the Constitution of Lesotho (Lesotho, 2000):

Lesotho shall endeavour to make education available to all and shall adopt policies aimed at securing that education is directed at the full development of the human personality and sense of dignity and strengthening the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In linking with the above, the vision of the Ministry of Education and Training (nd:1) is, among other things, that the "... Basotho shall be a functionally literate society with well-grounded moral and ethical values". This vision is also reflected in the Department of Youth's (Ministry of Gender, Youth and Sports, nd:2) goal to "... promote the dignity and self esteem of all Basotho, and ensure their physical, intellectual and moral well being". Although there is not a clear-cut school violence policy it is evident from the foregoing that the Lesotho government opposes violence.

Primary education (between 5 and 13 years of age) is compulsory in Lesotho. According to Dugbaza and Nsiah (2002:174) school attendance is very high among adolescents in both urban and rural areas, but higher among females than among males. While all male adolescents in urban areas had been to school at some time, a little over 12% of their counterparts in rural areas had never been to school. The requirement for young boys in rural areas, to herd cattle and afterwards go and work in the mines in South Africa, is a major contributing factor to the low participation rate of rural boys in formal education. Although initial school attendance among Basotho adolescents is high, the proportion staying on in school to complete school are very

low. Dugbaza and Nsiah (2002:194) found that only 36% of males and 57% of females complete primary school, with only some 6% of males and 11% of females completing secondary education. In linking with the above disparities in urban-rural attainment rates, cognisance should also be taken of the fact that the poorer, mountainous regions of Lesotho are disproportionately burdened, especially with regard to educational infrastructure, unqualified educators, higher learner-educator ratios, and repetition rates (May, Roberts, Moqasa & Woolard, 2002:23).

## **Empirical investigation**

### **Research instrument**

An investigation was conducted to determine the experiences of a group of Lesotho secondary school learners who had been victims and witnesses of school violence. The research instrument was an adapted version of Joshi and Kaschak's (1998:213-215) violence and trauma questionnaire for adolescents. Section A of the structured questionnaire provided biographical details of the respondents. In Section B, questions were asked firstly about the respondents as possible victims and/or witnesses of their fellow-learners' (Table 1) and educators' (Table 2) violent behaviour. The respondents' perceptions on the prevalence of learner (Table 3) and educator (Table 4) violence and violence-related behaviour were also ascertained. In Section C, an open-ended question attempted to obtain qualitative data on respondents' experiences and/or observations of school violence. This question read as follows: "Describe an incidence of violence that has happened at your school".

### **The test sample**

The universum consisted of learners from secondary schools in Lesotho. Lesotho citizens attending BEd Hons classes at the University of the Free State's Bloemfontein and Ladybrand campuses were asked to help with the administration of the questionnaires. A total of 280 learners completed the questionnaires, out of which eight were omitted because of missing data. Of the remaining 272 questionnaires, 139 were completed by girls and 133 by boys. The average age was 17 years and 3 months. The grade distribution was as follows: 60 Grade 8s, 26 Grade 9s, 38 Grade 10s, 46 Grade 11s and 102 Grade 12s. More than half of the respondents (58.83%) attended schools in urban areas.

### **Processing of data**

In Section B of the questionnaire, respondents had to make use of the following responses: 1 = never, 2 = once or twice a year, 3 = once or twice a month, 4 = once or twice a week, 5 = every day. The respondents' answers were then determined by mathematical calculations. Furthermore, the average gradation of each item was determined and the rank order established. A number of respondents, 180 (66.18%), met the request to describe a specific

incident of school violence. Due to the limited space available, only a few of their answers will be used to elucidate the quantitative data.

## Results

Table 1 summarises the respondents' experiences and observations with regard to the violent behaviour of their fellow learners in sequence, of the most common to the least common, type of negative behaviour.

Respondents mostly witnessed learners being threatened (Table 1, item 2) and attacked or assaulted by fellow learners (Table 2, item 5) at their respective schools. Only 36.40% of the respondents had never seen incidences of physical violence between learners. A Grade 11 girl gave the following vivid description of learners fighting:

*"It was a hot day when we witnessed a fight between two boys. They were fighting violently, using belts and knives. The one with the knife stabbed the one who was holding the belt, three times. Then the one holding the belt took a stone and hit him on the forehead and they both fell on the ground. They were separated by their friend."*

A 20-year-old Grade 12 girl wrote the following about two fellow learners:

*"They scratched each other with nails. They kicked each other like soccer balls. They also hit each other's faces like a punching bag. They were both bleeding."*

The following descriptions provide insight into the senselessness and severity of some incidences of school violence in Lesotho:

- An 18-year-old boy was stabbed to death with a knife and screw-driver after quarrelling about a borrowed pen.
  - A boy was stabbed to death by his classmate using a knife. The loss of Kaizer Chiefs against Orlando Pirates was the main cause of their fight.
- Although 81.25% of the respondents indicated that they had never witnessed incidences of learners attacking or assaulting their educators (Table 1, item 6), learners assaulting educators was a reality in some secondary schools in Lesotho. A Grade 12 girl described how learners at her school had thrown stones at their principal. Another girl wrote:

*"The students complained that the teachers were not teaching, therefore they went on strike throwing stones to the teachers and the students who were not on their side."*

Educators are, however, not only the victims of school violence; some of them are the perpetrators of violence. Table 2 summarises the respondents' experiences and observations with regard to the violent behaviour of their educators, in sequence of the most common to the least common, type of negative behaviour.

Educators threatening learners seemed to be a common practice in some Lesotho secondary schools. Only 46.32% of the respondents had never witnessed and 55.14% had never experienced threatening behaviour by their educators. From the following descriptions and the quantitative data (Table 2, items 3 and 4) it was obvious that learners often suffered verbal and phy-

**Table 1** Respondents as victims and/or witnesses of their fellow learners' violent behaviour

Item	RO	MR	How often have other children in your school:	5		4		3		2		1	
				n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
2	1	2.96	Threatened other children?	59	21.69	48	17.65	53	19.49	48	17.65	64	23.52
5	2	2.28	Attacked or assaulted other children?	23	8.46	32	11.76	41	15.07	77	28.31	99	36.40
1	3	1.96	Threatened you?	14	5.15	24	8.82	29	10.66	75	27.57	130	47.80
3	4	1.38	Threatened one or more of your educators?	5	1.84	6	2.21	11	4.04	44	16.18	206	75.73
4	4	1.38	Attacked or assaulted you?	4	1.47	13	4.78	14	5.15	45	16.54	196	72.06
6	6	1.26	Attacked or assaulted one of more of your educators?	4	1.47	3	1.10	1	0.37	43	15.81	221	81.25
Av.		1.87											

RO = rank order; MR = mean rating

1 = never; 2 = once or twice a year; 3 = once or twice a month; 4 = once or twice a week; 5 = every day

**Table 2** Respondents as victims and/or witnesses of their educators' violent behaviour

Item	RO	MR	How often have educators in your school:	5		4		3		2		1	
				n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
2	1	2.36	Threatened other children?	41	15.07	35	12.87	31	11.40	39	14.34	126	46.32
1	2	2.04	Threatened you?	31	11.40	22	8.09	24	8.83	45	16.54	150	55.14
5	3	1.82	Attacked or assaulted other children?	26	9.56	14	5.15	19	6.99	39	14.34	174	63.96
4	4	1.42	Attacked or assaulted you?	14	5.14	10	3.68	5	1.84	18	6.62	225	82.72
3	5	1.21	Threatened one or more of your educators?	1	0.37	6	2.21	5	1.84	24	8.83	236	86.75
6	6	1.14	Attacked or assaulted one of more of your educators?	1	0.37	1	0.37	8	2.94	16	5.88	246	90.44
Av.		1.67											

RO = rank order; MR = mean rating

1 = never; 2 = once or twice a year; 3 = once or twice a month; 4 = once or twice a week; 5 = every day



sical humiliation at the hands of their educators:

*"A teacher in my school once beat a student with hot claps, fists, and whips so much that the student fainted. The student reported to other teachers. The next day the same teacher wrote an insult on the classroom wall, and ... instead of being supported, the student was blamed for the insult, yet he was utterly innocent. As a result, the child was irrationally suspended."*

A 16-year-old girl wrote: *"I have been punched in the face by a teacher."*

Corporal punishment is permissible in Lesotho. However, the following cannot be seen as acceptable behaviour by any human being, let alone by an educator:

*"A student whose hair was uncombed talked to his friends during assembly. The headmaster noticed him. He was annoyed and attacked the student suddenly and started whipping him with his belt. The student pushed others to escape while others giggled. After whipping him, the headmaster left him and returned to the platform. The student was very embarrassed and he kept quiet like other students."*

*"We are just beaten like slaves and we are even insulted for minor reasons. Our customs are not taken into consideration and they are joking about disrespecting our parents."*

*"Some students are whipped as they are not human beings. Teachers do not like the students ..."*

Table 3 summarises the respondents' perceptions of the prevalence of learner violence and violence-related behaviour, in sequence of the most common to the least common, type of behaviour.

Use of drugs and carrying of weapons seemed to be the most widespread violence-related behaviour among Lesotho learners. The descriptions by the respondents of learners physically attacking their fellow-learners, as well as educators, validated the findings in Table 3 (item 1). These descriptions also gave an insight into the violent deaths of learners at the hands of fellow learners (*cf.* Table 3, item 4).

A worrying 10.66% of the respondents shared the perception that (some) learners at their respective schools raped fellow learners. A 15-year-old boy gave the following description of an incident of sexual violence:

*"More than three years ago there was a boy who was one of the learners in my school. He raped two girls. The boy came from school when he raped the two girls. The two girls were going to gather wood in the forest. He threatened the girls. He said that the forest belong to him. He is in prison now."*

There was a correspondence between the rank order of the respondents' perceptions on the prevalence of learner (Table 3) and educator (Table 4) violence and violence-related behaviour. No qualitative descriptions, with the exception of cases of physical and verbal abuse, could be found bearing witness to negative educator violence-related behaviour.

In the following section the findings will be discussed and juxtaposed with relevant research findings on school violence.

**Table 3** Respondents' perceptions on the prevalence of learner violence and violence-related behaviour

Item	RO	MR	Children in my school:	5		4		3		2		1	
				n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
6	1	3.33	Use drugs	117	43.01	35	12.87	17	6.25	28	10.30	75	27.57
1	2	2.52	Carry weapons	79	29.04	14	5.15	20	7.35	44	16.18	115	42.28
7	3	1.79	Sell drugs	31	11.40	20	7.35	9	3.31	12	4.41	200	73.53
2	4	1.34	Have been in jail	3	1.10	1	0.37	7	2.57	63	23.16	198	72.79
5	5	1.14	Have raped someone	2	0.74	-	-	2	0.74	25	9.19	243	89.34
4	6	1.09	Have killed someone	2	0.74	-	-	-	-	16	5.88	254	93.38
3	7	1.08	Have shot someone	1	0.37	-	-	1	0.37	16	5.88	254	93.38
Av.		1.76											

**Table 4** Respondents' perceptions on the prevalence of educator violence and violence-related behaviour

Item	RO	MR	Educators in my school:	5		4		3		2		1	
				n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
6	1	2.38	Use drugs	67	24.63	22	8.09	10	3.68	20	7.35	153	56.25
1	2	1.37	Carry weapons	16	5.88	6	2.21	2	0.74	15	5.51	233	85.66
7	3	1.15	Sell drugs	5	1.84	3	1.10	3	1.10	7	2.58	254	93.38
5	4	1.11	Have raped someone	2	0.74	3	1.10	-	-	14	5.15	253	93.01
2	5	1.07	Have been in jail	1	0.37	-	-	-	-	15	5.52	256	94.11
4	6	1.05	Have killed someone	1	0.37	-	-	2	0.74	5	1.84	264	97.05
3	7	1.03	Have shot someone	1	0.37	-	-	1	0.37	4	1.47	266	97.79
Av.		1.31											

## Discussion

The 1978 release of the Safe School Study Report to the USA Congress launched the first shocking statistics regarding violence in schools. This report indicated that approximately 282 000 learners and 5 200 educators were physically assaulted in American secondary schools every month (Elliot, Hamburg & Williams, 1998:4). Since then, there has been a growing awareness of this problem worldwide. Numerous reports and studies of interpersonal violence and vandalism in schools are published annually (*cf.* Introduction and Statement of the problem). Data from the 2003 national Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (in Brener, Lowry & Barrios, 2005:82) revealed, for example, that 12.8% of secondary school learners in the USA were involved in physical fighting on school property. A comparative study of member states of the European Union found that the rate of juvenile violence has risen sharply in the past two decades, in some countries by as much as 50–100% (Travis, 1999 in Hughes, 2004:64). The South African press routinely carries stories of violent robbery, rape, and murder in schools (De Wet, 2003:36–44). The findings of this study, namely, that learners often act violently towards fellow learners, is therefore in line with research findings in the USA, European Union, South Africa, and elsewhere.

Consistent with previous research, in this study it was found that some educators verbally, physically and sexually abused their learners (Tables 2 and 4). Mitchell and Mothobi-Tapela (2004:8) found, for example, that some Zimbabwean educators beat their learners with thick sticks, hosepipes or even ropes. They found furthermore that some Zimbabwean learners were sexually abused by their educators in “... *dark places, in storerooms, and raped in the maize field*”. In an UNICEF supported enquiry into sexual abuse of school children in Ghana, O Agu *et al.* (2004:14) found that about 11% of the 490 respondents indicated that they had been victims of sexual harassment. Educators constituted 5.7% of the perpetrators.

The severity, with which some of Lesotho’s educators administer corporal punishment, emerged from the qualitative data. This is unacceptable and may be seen as a violation of the Code of Conduct of Teachers (Lesotho 1995, Education Act No. 10 of 1995, Article 48[g]). According to this Article, an educator commits “... a breach of discipline and is liable to disciplinary proceedings and to punishment” if he/she

... conducts himself [*sic*] improperly in his [*sic*] official capacity or in any way that affects adversely the performance of his [*sic*] duties as a teacher or that brings the Lesotho Teaching Service or his [*sic*] school into disrepute.

Morrell (2002:43) rightly argues that educators whose identities are vested in power and hierarchy contribute to violence by being violent (using, for example, corporal punishment), by condoning violence (turning a blind eye to bullying and sexual harassment) and by supporting a school ethos intolerant of differences and insistent on conformity.

Educators are not the only perpetrators of school violence; some of them also suffer verbal and physical abuse from their learners (Table 1, item 6), as

well as, albeit to a lesser extent, from fellow educators (Table 2, item 6). It is disconcerting to note that 24.27% of the respondents indicated that they had seen and/or heard how fellow learners threatened educators; 18.75% had witnessed learners physically attacking their educators. Unfortunately, abusive behaviour directed against educators is not a problem unique to Lesotho, as will become apparent from the following research findings. The US Department of Education (2000) and Kondrasuk, Greene, Waggoner, Edwards and Nayak-Rhodes (2005:640) found that nearly one out of every five public school educators reported being verbally abused, 8% reported being physically threatened, and 2% reported being physically attacked. Researchers at the University of South Australia (Youth Studies Australia, 2005:4) found that learners were responsible for 33% of violent attacks on educators. Physical harassment and assaults made up 42% of incidents of abuse. A 1986 survey carried out among their members by the National Association of School Masters and Union of Women Teachers (NAS/UWT) in England found that 66% of the respondents had experience of verbal abuse and sometimes of personal and insulting comments. Almost one in four educators had been threatened with violence. One in ten educators had suffered an attempted attack by a learner and more than one in 25 educators had suffered actual physical violence from a learner (Houghton, Wheldall & Merrett, 1988:298). A 2002 report by NAS/UWT (Ahmed, 2002:1) revealed that educators in 71 schools had threatened to take industrial action during the preceding 18 months because "... pupils have proved too difficult to teach". Educators said they were often spat at, kicked and punched by learners. An online survey conducted in Britain during March 2005 by Teacher Support Network (2005: 1) found that 84% of respondents have been verbally abused by learners — from swearing and backchat, to threats of violence, or comments of a sexual nature; 20% of responding educators have been physically assaulted; and 38% of responding educators have had their personal property vandalised.

In a study on sexual violence in Lesotho, Thurman, Brown, Kendall and Bloem (2005:1) found that 33% of the 1 049 women interviewed reported having experienced forced sex by the age of 18. Boyfriends were the most common perpetrators of forced sex (66%). The problem of forced sex and rape was aggravated by the fact that male adolescents in Lesotho, after returning from initiation schools, showed "... a strong interest in sex, which in some cases led to the rape and abuse of women" (Mturi & Hennink, 2005:133). The current study showed that 10.66% of the respondents shared the view that learners in their school had raped someone (Table 3, item 5). All three studies thus emphasised the grim reality that sexual violence is a serious problem in Lesotho schools. This problem is exaggerated by the fact that women's ability to protect themselves from HIV infection is hindered by sexual violence (Thurman *et al.*, 2005:1). Sexual activity, whether forced or not, may also have dire educational consequences for females in Lesotho. Dugbaza and Nsiah (2002:194) found that nearly one in four out-of-school female adolescents had dropped out of school because they got pregnant or were forced to get married. This may have serious livelihood consequences for females in a

country where 49% of the population lives below the poverty line and the unemployment rate is 45% (CIA, 2006:8).

This study also provided evidence that school violence in Lesotho is a manifestation of gender inequality and violence. Girls often bear the brunt of physical (“... *I have been punched in the face by a teacher*”) and sexual (“... *he raped girls*”) violence. Most often violence in Lesotho schools is perpetrated by boys (“... *we witnessed a fight between two boys*” and “... *a boy was stabbed to death by his classmate*”) and male educators (“... *the headmaster ... attacked the student suddenly and started whipping him with his belt*”). This type of violence may be seen as a violent expression of masculinity (Bhana, 2005:100). According to Connell (1999:8) there is a widespread belief in some societies that it is natural for men to be violent: “... rape and combat are part of the unchanging order of nature”. Morahanye (2004:15) have found that the Basotho society is patriarchal with pronounced male dominance in different sectors of life. The subordination of females to the authority of males in Lesotho may, therefore, as illustrated in this study, result in physical, sexual or psychological harm to female learners by fellow-learners and educators. The gendered hierarchies in Lesotho thus have a profound influence on school violence.

The general association between drug use and involvement in violent incidents has been well documented (*cf.* Daane, 2003:26-27; Furlong, Casas, Corral, Chung & Bates, 1997:263-281). The perceived commonness of drug use amongst learners and educators in Lesotho is therefore worrying (see Table 3, item 6 and Table 4, item 6). More than 16 years ago, Meursing and Morojele (1989:1337) found in a self-reporting survey that only between 6% and 15% of the 1 133 secondary school learners from Lesotho who took part in their study indicated that they smoked marihuana and sniffed petrol, benzene, and glue, respectively. If these findings are compared with those of the current study, there appears to be an increase in the use of drugs among Lesotho secondary school learners. The present study did not probe the question of alcohol use among educators and learners in Lesotho. Cognisance should therefore be taken of Meursing and Morojele’s (1989:1337) findings in this regard, namely, that about half the participants had drunk alcohol at some point in their lives. Meursing and Morojele (1989:1337) found no evidence of widespread alcohol abuse.

The carrying of weapons to school is seen as another important risk-related behaviour (Furlong, Bates & Smith, 2001:127-137). It is therefore disconcerting to note that 41.54% of the respondents indicated that learners in their respective schools carried weapons to school at least once a month (Table 3, item 1). If this is contrasted with the findings from two studies in the USA, the seriousness of the problem in Lesotho is emphasised. The USA Centers for Disease Control (in Cox *et al.*, 2004:134) found in a 1998 study that 18% of learners nationwide had carried a weapon to school at least once in the month prior to the study. Data from the 2003 national Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (in Brener, Lowry & Barrios, 2005:81) revealed that 6.1% of secondary school learners carry weapons to school. It should however be

noted that data, as well as the comparison of data on the carrying of weapons, should be treated with caution, because respondents may not share a common understanding of what the term 'weapon' means (Furlong & Morrison, 2000:77).

The study was limited by several factors. Firstly, the study included only a very small sample of secondary school learners from Lesotho. Secondly, it was, by implication, a sample of convenience — BEd Hons students were used to administer the questionnaires. Thirdly, the accuracy of the data was limited by the learners' accuracy in reporting their observations. The respondents had to hand the questionnaire back to an educator — they may therefore have felt exposed and therefore unwilling to describe incidents of educators' violent behaviour. This study should be seen as preparatory research on school violence in Lesotho. It is recommended that future research should carefully consider the sample and administration for the study. The following topics also need to be researched in the Lesotho context:

- Alcohol use and drug abuse among educators and learners. In the absence of such a study, educational authorities may surmise that the drug problem has not yet become a major national social problem. However, Affinnih (2002:282) warns that such an attitude may become an obstacle to assessing such activities as drug use, user monitoring, and systematic data collection on the impact of drug abuse in society.
- Human rights as well as legal issues with regard to corporal punishment.

### **Concluding remarks and recommendations**

Although there is not a clear-cut school violence policy in Lesotho, it is evident from Article 28(a) of the Lesotho Constitution, the vision of the Ministry of Education and Training, and the goals of the Department of Youth, that the Lesotho government opposes violence in schools. However, from the limited data presented here, it appears that most of the learners (62.13%) and 36.6% of the educators use drugs at least once a month. It was furthermore found that 41.54% of the learners and 8.83% of the educators apparently carry weapons to school at least once a month. The data also revealed that 20.22% and 14.71% the respondents witnessed incidents where learners and educators attacked or assaulted learners at least once a week, respectively. It appears that school violence is far too common in an environment that should represent a safe haven for intellectual, emotional and social growth.

Having said this, what can schools realistically do to combat the scourge of violence? Increasing international concern about youth violence has spurred the development of numerous programmes directed at teaching learners attitudes, knowledge and skills to reduce their involvement in violence (Farrell, Meyer, Sullivan & Kung, 2003:101-102). However, it is not advisable for any country to adopt an anti-violence programme which has not been adapted or specifically developed for that country's individual circumstances. In the development of an anti-violence programme for Lesotho, attention should therefore be given, amongst other things, to the gendered hierarchies in the Lesotho society, traditional customs such as sending boys to initiation

schools, as well as the link between poverty and violence. A concerted effort is needed by the Lesotho Department of Education and other role players to provide effective programmes to schools for addressing school violence. In the development of an all-encompassing anti-violence programme, cognisance should be taken of the following steps which characterise a successful anti-violence programme:

1. A comprehensive approach to violence should be adopted, which would include developing sound prevention programmes and procedures for intervening quickly when a learner is in distress;
2. The programme should be started early and form part of a long-term commitment by the school;
3. Strong leadership should be developed and disciplinary policies put in place;
4. Staff development should be emphasised, with the nurturing of competent and caring educators;
5. Parental involvement should be encouraged, making possible a consistent response between school and home to the issues of violence;
6. The creation of inter-agency partnerships and community linkage should be built up, in order to provide more resources for children; and
7. A culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate approach is vital to any programme.

The programme should lastly break the link between normalized masculinity expectations and violence. The programme should therefore help boys express themselves without relying on domination, power, aggression or violence (Rabrenovic *et al.*, 2004:1128; Klein, 2006:168).

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