

## Exploring a secondary school educator's experiences of school violence: a case study

Suzanne Bester and Alfred du Plessis

suzanne.bester@up.ac.za; alfhaupt@gmail.com

*In an increasingly violent society, South African secondary school educators often need to manage violent learners. In the context of a challenging and uniquely South African educational environment, managing this escalating violence often leaves educators battling to cope with increasing demands for learner performance in the midst of an inherited culture of violence and intimidation that spills over into the classroom. We attempt to explore, from an interpretive perspective, the experiences of an educator in a violence-affected educational setting. This includes the educator's perceptions of the causes, nature and results of violence. The article also unveils the educator's emotional experience and her perceptions of what contributes to the violence.*

**Keywords:** bio-ecological systems theory; educator; learners; violence/school violence

### Introduction and problem statement

How does an educator experience violence in a secondary school? Attempting to answer this important question is our primary focus in this article. A deeper understanding of educator experiences is necessary in order to

- enhance the effectiveness of educator support
- develop and streamline educational policies
- focus on further educational research.

Although through the years, theoretical assumptions of the causes of violence have shifted from the more traditional theories that mainly address a one- or two-dimensional view on violence towards more integrative and comprehensive theories (DeKeseredy & Perry, 2006) such as the bio-ecological systems theory, current literature is limited with regard to the exploration of educators' experiences of violence. Despite all the widespread and thorough attention that current literature is giving to the pressing issues related to school violence, it is often more focused on intervention strategies (Kingery & Coggeshall, 2001; Speaker & Petersen, 2000) than on the plight of the educator experiencing the violence. Karcher (2004:7), when suggesting developmental intervention by educators feels that central to this is the tenet that by helping youths establish a balance of connectedness to school, family, and friends, they will become less likely to engage in violent behaviour. Connectedness is also referred to in some of the literature as school coherence that is influenced by the educator's support and perceptions of danger within the school environment (Bowen, Richman, Brewster & Bowen, 1998:274).

A vast quantity of risk and protective factors for school violence can be accessed throughout the literature. For example, Lynch and Cicchetti (1997:

83-84) suggest that a protective factor would be for an adolescent to identify strongly with his parents and educators; May (2004:237) sees it as a risk factor when students bring weapons to school for self-protection, and Lupton-Smith (2004:137) feels that a protective measure at school would be to teach all students how to negotiate, mediate and manage conflict constructively.

Literature further frequently advises educators on how best to handle themselves, the learners and their parents, in order to be effective in combating violence at school level. Since they are expected to create a secure school environment, doing so will also serve their profession. Emphasis is often placed on understanding the context of the learner and on knowing what could reasonably be expected of them (Watson, Poda, Miller, Rice & West, 1990:75). A secure environment is described by Oosthuizen and Roos (2003:39) as a place where a learner conforms to the school rules.

In terms of a learner displaying violent behaviour at school, it is important to consider the comprehensive view of interrelated factors influencing both the perpetrator and the victim of violence. The bio-ecological systemic environment of the specific educator will also influence the experience of the educator. Astor, Pitner and Duncan (1996:340) regard the bio-ecological systems theory as an important frame of reference for mental health consultants in helping educators generate effective school-based responses to school violence.

### **Sample**

From a qualitative interpretive perspective of inquiry, the researcher conducted fairly unstructured interviews with an educator to pursue the primary research question: What are the experiences of an educator with regard to violence in a secondary school? Furthermore, theme analysis, a recursive literature review and member checking were used in an attempt to enhance the quality of the data.

### **The educator and school violence**

Few people will argue against the statement that school violence has a devastating effect on a school system. Recently, there seems to have been an increase in the reported number of serious incidents of school violence in South African schools. South African learners are victimised at a rate of 160 learners per 1,000, a figure that is significantly higher than for example in the United States, where the latest statistical data yields a rate of 57 learners per 1,000 who fall victim to comparative forms of school violence (Burton, 2008:2).

The media often focus on the explicit details of violent incidents in schools and capitalize on the sensation these incidents create. Very rarely do they focus on the vulnerability of educators in coping with the overflow of violent symptoms from society into our schools. In some schools, educators have complained that since 1999 the Department of Education (DoE) has not supported their efforts to rid schools of troublemakers who they have attempted to expel on reasonable grounds. This situation led to a court case against the

DoE (Bezuidenhout, 1999).

The DoE (2002) recognises the reality, responsibility and influence of the education system within the community at large and seems to accept the important role it has to play. The primary tasks of schools are to act as institutions of teaching and learning and therefore they have to take into consideration and manage those elements that negatively affect their primary task. This is often done under the slogan of a zero-tolerance policy. Osborne (2004:67) makes the comment that people in positions to effect change (such as educators) are not always well trained to deal with issues like school violence. They need to be informed by experts on the ramifications of proposed remedies, such as schools contemplating the implementation of zero-tolerance rules, the installation of metal detectors, the erosion of student privacy through random locker searches, and the creation of a more restrictive (jail-like) environment. The call is made for researchers and experts in the education field to provide thoughtful and informed comments on the likely ramifications of implementing these strategies.

How to strike a balance between the important educational demands, violent societal influences and dedication to the perceived educational calling, requires that we seriously contemplate educators' experiences of violence, particularly in the secondary school environment where adolescents are negotiating their often-tumultuous journey towards adulthood.

### **Methodology**

Using an interpretive paradigm, the researchers attempted to understand the feelings, experiences, social situations and phenomena of violence as it occurs in the 'real world' of the educator, as a central axiom of interpretive research is to interpret data within the context (Terre Blance & Kelly, 1999:127). The epistemology of interpretivism is to know the world of human action and to understand the subjective meanings of the action to the actors. Therefore, the researchers attempted to get an insider's perspective into the experiences of the educator about violence (Schwandt, 2007:152). The researchers needed to stay true to the nature of the interpretive approach appreciating that how people know reality can differ greatly (Smit, 2001:69).

During the inquiry into the experiences of learner violence by a secondary school educator, the researchers chose a qualitative data collection strategy which consisted of unstructured interviews to compile a rich case study by obtaining first-hand data from the participant.

### **Interviews and observations**

Interviews with the participant were conducted outside the school in a neutral context in the form of face-to-face unstructured interviews. Several general research questions were constructed in advance. Posing open-ended questions during the interview shielded the participant from feeling pressurised through the presumption of any specific answer (Terre Blance & Kelly, 1999:130). Questions and rephrasing were used in order to facilitate a clear communi-

cation and understanding between the researchers and the participant.

The following general questions were asked during the interview in order to provide direction to the interview process:

- What are your experiences with regard to violence as a secondary school educator as displayed by your learners?
- How often do you experience incidents of violence in your school environment?
- To whom is the violence usually directed?
- In what way do you feel personally affected by school violence?
- How do you perceive the effect of violent incidents in the school?
- How do these violent incidents affect the classroom dynamics?
- How has school violence affected you with regard to personal safety?
- How did your experiences of violence influence the way you handle conflict in the school environment?
- In your experience as an educator over many years, what is your perception of the current disciplinary system in addressing school violence?
- How do you think school violence is influencing the way you manage your classroom?
- What are the challenges you have to deal with at school that can be linked to school violence?
- What professional training have you received in order to be able to deal with the violence that you are experiencing at school?
- What was the nature of this training that you received?

The interview procedure was as follows:

**Session 1:** During this session the participant discussed her experiences regarding school violence. The discussion resulted from applying open-ended questions.

**Session 2:** The researchers discussed the findings of the research with the participant to ensure the credibility of the study and to ensure that the participant could indicate her satisfaction with the level of anonymity promised to her.

Observation took place in a naturalistic way while the interviews were being conducted, according to Terre Blance and Kelly (1999:134). 'Interacting with people in a naturalistic way makes it possible to understand their world "from the inside out" '.

### **Educator's profile**

The selection criteria for the participant included female educators experienced in teaching secondary school learners from Grade 8 to Grade 12, who had been exposed in some way to the influence of learner violence in secondary schools. One participant was selected for the in-depth exploration of the research problem.

The educator was selected through a combination of convenient and purposeful sampling strategies.

**Table 1** Educator's profile

Experience	Race	Gender	Qualification level	Current secondary school work environment
40 years as an educator including management experience	Coloured	Female	Four years teacher training	English medium Former Model C-school Multi-cultural staff and learners

### Data analysis

Informed by authors such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2002:475-483) and Punch (2005:195-209) the researchers selectively analysed aspects of the human actions and events that illustrated recurring themes from the interviews. The researchers attempted to go beyond descriptive analysis and add a theoretical dimension. The interviews were transcribed and concepts were coded. The concepts were categorised into higher order concepts and then, through Axial (or theoretical) coding, connections were discovered between the thematic concepts.

Data were interpreted from a constructivist framework. The participant was encouraged to participate in the data interpretation, and to check that data interpretation were accurate and in accordance with her experiences.

The data analysis unfolded as a continuous process, starting from the initial meeting with the educator as a potential participant. Other potential participants were eliminated from the research due to the lack of depth of their experience compared to that of the chosen participant, as was revealed during the informal conversations we had leading up to the start of the research process.

All interviews were transcribed and then studied several times in conjunction with the corresponding non-verbal clues given by the participant. Field notes provided further guidance during the data-analysis process, supporting the process of dividing the data into identifiable themes. During the process, the results were verified continuously by means of audio and visual recordings of the interviews, which proved very helpful as a means of ensuring data quality. This also provided the opportunity to follow a process by which the different themes could be compared and relations between the different themes could be studied, so as to become aware of patterns that could be categorised. In this way, the data could be synthesised in new ways, to make interpretation substantive within the unique research context.

Three processes were followed to ensure effective data control. First, the participant verified the data results to prevent misinterpretation of meaning or misrepresentation of the content or context of the collected data. Second, data results were compared with existing literature, to identify similarities or discrepancies that might call for further verification, including the possibility of further research in future. Last, data verification took place by following a process whereby data results were monitored by a supervising researcher.

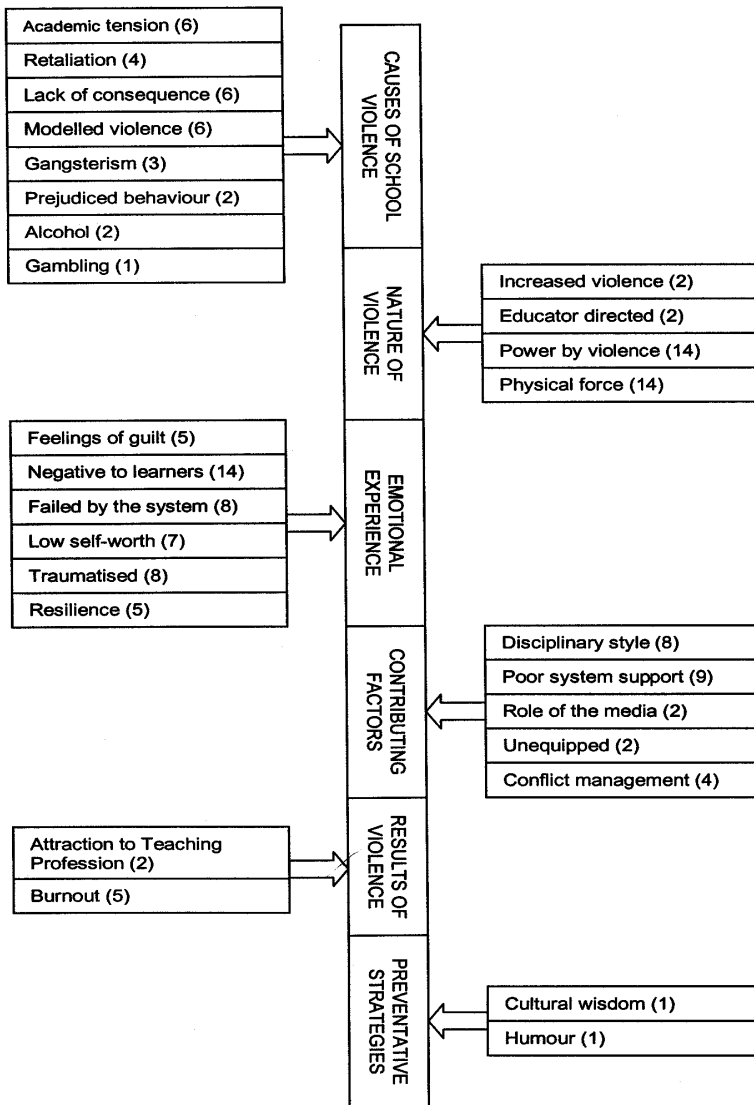


Figure 1 Results of the data analysis indicating the experiences of the secondary school educator relating to school violence. The main categories are displayed vertically while the thematic sub-categories and the perceived frequency in brackets are displayed horizontally.

A summary of the main data categories and the sub-categories is presented in Figure 1. Fifty themes with regard to school violence were identified as forming part of the experiences of the secondary school educator. Through the data analysis process those themes were grouped under main categories. Figure 1 presents the summary of the analysis. It also gives an indication of the perceived frequency with which the specific theme presented itself during the data-collection process.

Further explication of how the authors arrived at the various categories and sub-categories, as summarised in Figure 1, is presented in Table 2. Table 2 attempts to give an indication of how the authors went about analysing the data and give the reader some insight into the verbatim experiences as expressed by the participant. The data in Table 2 form the basis from which the findings are discussed.

## **Discussion of findings**

### **Causes of school violence**

The results of this study indicate that the educator perceived the main causes of violence to be: academic tension, not repercussions for behaviour and violence modelled by society. This is linked to the traditional perception that violence may have an institutional origin. According to Keller and Tapasak (2004:105), the relationship between academic underachievement and anti-social behaviour, particularly aggression, is well established.

Retaliation against provocation and bullying at school are further contributing factors leading to violence. This result is also clearly supported by literature. Gerler (2004:4) views physical violence at school often to be the product of irrational, overblown retaliation to verbal abuse. The media also recently reported an alleged perpetrator of violence as being the victim of bullying over an extended period of time (*Beeld*, 2008).

According to the educator, other factors such as gangsterism, alcohol use, gambling and prejudiced behaviour in the form of xenophobic threats and sexism at school also play a role in causing school violence. She was not able to identify with certainty gangs in the school setting, yet was able to confirm an unwanted connectivity between certain learners. Kodluboy (2004:195) remarks that school systems are prone to ambivalence about or outright denial of gang presence or the significance of gang presence in the schools. In his view, the primary significance of gang membership for schools is that gang members represent a significant subgroup of students who are more likely to be at risk and to present risk to other students than the general adolescent population. According to his study, the rate of violent offences for gang members is three times higher than for non-gang delinquents (Kodluboy, 2004: 210). His view could not be confirmed by this case study.

Reddington (2007:97) suggests that the alcohol, drugs, and delinquency connection runs through all categories of crimes. In a study conducted by him, the majority of youths arrested for either violent crimes or property crimes were involved in the use of some substance at the time of the crime. This would also seem to hold true for the situations reported in this article.

**Table 2** Further explication of the data content relating to the various categories and sub-categories

<b>Category:</b> Causes of school violence	Contextualisation of verbatim data	Verbatim quotes from the interviews
<b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Academic tension</b> Caused by academic failure at school	The participant felt very strongly about the fact that academic pressure on the learners was one of the main causes contributing to violent behaviour. The academic tension caused incidents of violence to occur more often around the academic pressure times, such as when learners were faced with an exam, awaiting their reported or receiving their marks.	“Depending on the time frame, for instance now we are waiting on our results - Did I do OK, Did I do alright, am I failing? - and then they start, especially those who know, I didn’t do what I should have done”
Poor academic self-concept	It seems that many violence prone learners are faced with a poor academic self concept and often poor work ethics when it comes to academic related tasks. Violent attacks seem to take place due to academic jealousy between learners, and often the diligent learner is terrorised and victimised by those with a weak academic self concept.	“It (intimidation, terrorisation, bullying) happens. Do you know which learners it is directed at? The respectable learner, the intelligent learner, the one who does his work, not necessarily sucking up to the teacher but he has a purpose in life. I need to get these marks, I need to do this work, I need to do this work, this is my aim further down the line and this is how I'm going to get to that. Those are the ones that are victimized”
Over emphasis of academic orientation by the school (achievement at all cost)	The jealousy is further instigated by the behaviour of teachers who often pay more attention to those learners who are academic achievers, making it hard for learners struggling with the academic challenges to identify with the academic demands placed on them by the teacher and school as an academic institution.	“You have a 80 percenter and a 30 percenter, and immediately there is a jealousy there, and unfortunately it happens that teachers give more attention to the learners that is sharper than to those who are not so sharp and being not his or her fault, but what adds to that is that the not so sharp learners they are terribly, terribly rude. One learner with the better mark will laugh at the other saying, Hey, I have got better marks than you! And then it will start an argument”



<p>Lack a culture of learning and teaming up against the teacher</p>	<p>The participant reported experiencing the learners as rivals against her in the class by teaming up against her in defiance of her attempts to do her work</p>	<p>“But mam, but you never told us this, you never said that, then I would just call on one of their classmates, please when did I say this? Or when did I ask you to do this piece of homework, and then their friends tell them - and I hate it when they are calling me she - She said we must do this, that and the other. Then I have never said it and then they stick to what they say....Jy het vir hulle huiswerk gegee, ses het die huiswerk gedoen. Die sewende een sê NEE! Dan chain almal in, Jo, dis om van te skree of ‘n moord te pleeg, soos wat hulle nou aangaan en vir jou die leerkrag as die swakkeling voorstel. As die hordes eers met hulle geluide begin</p>
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<p><b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Retaliation</b> Victimisation Targeting the well behaved Intimidation Retaliation by victims of school violence</p>	<p>Referring to a specific incident where a learner of her school attacked and seriously injured another, she commented that it was an example of retaliation after a long period of victimisation and intimidation. There seem to be many students that are victimised for standing out as diligent learners. Sometimes the tension within learners builds up to a point where they then retaliate with acts of violence. It seems that being academically diligent is interpreted by some as a sign of weakness.</p>	<p>“Unfortunately the one who was assaulted, I don’t really want to mention it but he deserved it, he had it coming to him.”</p>
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<p><b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Lack of consequences</b> Get away with anything</p>	<p>Strong views about the lack of consequences for violent offenders were voiced in frustration as a definite cause of further and continued violence at school. It seems that current measures to combat</p>	<p>“I will not report it because I know nothing will come from it and I will be the big fool because the learners also know, Aag you can go report me, nothing will come of it. Dit (dissipline stelsel) is glad nie effektief nie. Dit spreek glad nie geweld aan nie, die leerlinge is</p>
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Can do what they want nothing will happen	It seems that current measures to combat violence and the spread of violence at school are inadequate and are often not used by educators, due to its perceived limited value. This links up with a perception that there is little support from the educational system with regard to maintaining discipline and order in schools and more specifically in the classroom environment. After inquiring about the reason why she didn't report an incident in which she was physically assaulted in the classroom by a sixteen year old boy in front of other learners, the participant stated the following verbatim response.	intelligent genoeg om te weet, I can do as I please, nothing will come of it. Hulle kan nie eers expel word nie. They can suspend me, but they cannot expel me, if I come back, I'm still a star for the wrongs that I have done. Die onderwysers se hande is afgekap, en daarmee wil ek nie sê ons wil net voor die voet die kinders streepsuiker (pakslae) gee nie, maar êrens moet daar 'n afskrikmiddel wees, wat die kinders gaan keer om te vorentoe te beur. Hulle moet weet hulle kan net so ver, want sou hulle verder vorentoe beur, sal dit, dat of die ander met hulle gebeur."
<b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Modelled violence</b> Modelled violence leads to maintaining violence	As a result of the perceived lack of consequences for acts of violence, the participant believes further acts of violence take place. Learners see other learners use violence successfully against fellow learners and teachers. They therefore believe it is the best way to achieve what they want and model the violent behaviour.	"Because nothing happens to those perpetrators, our young people would just go. Oh, he did that and that and nothing happened, I am also going to go that way (the way of violence) Then nothing will happen to me either. I don't know whether they think that because he came away with it they may too, I don't know. There is a terrible vibe in the class."
Role models in community perpetuate violence	Violence is further modelled by the community and at home. Statements by politicians promoting violence as a means of settling conflict, contributed to the violent examples learners follow. Add to this the message from the community	"But now I also blame the life outside school (for violence). The things they have to deal with... if I cannot get it right, some people will hold you, torture you, that is what is imprinted in them. Our children that you will normally find in our public schools have been exposed to violence, and attacks, in the home and in the community."

that it is acceptable to use violence as a means to pursue your causes. The participant felt that the fact that political leaders can get away with statements promoting violence sets a negative precedent contributing to future school violence.

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**Subcategory:  
Gangsterism**

Although the participant didn't identify gangsters in the school where she is working at present, she acknowledged the effect of learners being connected to gangsters/gangs and its potential contribution to violence.

The participant also identified the reality of gangsters from outside the school who join gangsters still at school during some school days.

"I wouldn't say that we have gangsters at school. They may have connections, but we don't really have gangsters like in the earlier days. And yes it does contribute to the violence at the school, because you bump me, I will bump you back, then I go and I tell my brothers about you and tomorrow they come and wait at the bus terminal and they frighten you a little. They are connected yes. Weet jy en daar is nie nou nie, maar by skool C en ook by skool G was daar kinders met gang connections. Onthou jy aan die begin van die jaar het hulle Mrs. W se kar gesteel. En dis kinders wat daar skool gegaan het, hulle het geweet wat 'afgaan', hulle het presies geweet waar is die personeelkamer."

"In the first place, because they (gangsters) are not such sharp learners, they are not working; they are not studying any further some of them left school, mid-term, midyear, mid-curriculum, they cannot find a job, and they pitch up at school. I tell them we don't have sport, but I am so afraid of Friday at school (civvies day) because I know the gangsters are going to pitch up. Like last Friday when we had the soccer. I told them (outside gangsters) they were older than the learners, you have to sit on that side."

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<p><b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Prejudiced behaviour</b> Cultural influence</p>	<p>The participant had strong feelings about her experience of prejudice towards the female educators by black male students. She contributed this to a culture of viewing females as inferior.</p>	<p>“...want vernaam waar jy ‘n onderwyseres is. Vir die swart man beteken die vrou absoluut niks. Hierdie kinders kan dit nie verstaan dat ons verwag dat hulle ons met respek moet behandel nie.”</p>
<p>Xenophobia</p>	<p>Xenophobic related incidents of violence were limited to her experience of threats and insults made in an isolated case.</p>	<p>“We have Mrs. M there (at school), she is from Zambia, when she started teaching at the school, she told me: Especially the younger learners, the Gr. 9 and Gr.10 learners, they wrote on her desk, Xenophobic insults ... She mentioned to me that she is so afraid of these learners.”</p>
<p><b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Alcohol</b></p>	<p>Some learners presenting with aggressive and mocking behaviour have been reported to smell of liquor. The participant referred to two cases that she was involved in within the past year, where learners had been using liquor while busy with their school day. Only one of these cases had, in her experience, led to violent behaviour.</p>	<p>“Aan sy houding het ek gesien hy wag net vir my om iets verkeerd te sê, dan sou hy iets aan my doen waarvoor ek vandag spyt sou gewees het. Ek kon sien aan sy houding, dit was uittartend, sê jy net iets...toe sê een kind vir hom, jy moet ophou om so te suip. Juffrou ruik net die drank aan sy asem.”</p>
<p><b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Gambling</b></p>	<p>Gambling is illegal under the age of 18 years. It is, however, extremely difficult to monitor. This hampers law enforcement at school.</p>	<p>“Vandag se kinders sal voor jou dobbel. Hulle sal nie omgee nie, jy kan vir hulle niks maak nie. Hulle kan baklei, hulle sal eerder vir jou aanrand, jy kan nie vir hulle sê boe of baa nie. [This was said in the light of a recent fight that occurred on the school premises that was caused by a gambling feud between two boys. In this specific incident the female teacher who was in the classroom at the time was also injured due to a blow to the head.]</p>



**Category: Emotional experience**

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**Subcategory:  
Feelings of guilt**

Personal  
Religion related  
guilt

The participant often refers to herself, feeling guilty about her own actions and reactions that might be contributing to violence.

“But I am I guess to blame in a way, I am still of the old school and I am very strict. Kyk ek voel baie skuldig dat ek nie doen, wat ek geleer is wat die regte ding is om te doen nie. I must take the blame because I am not too sympathetic with them anymore. Ek het vir die Here sorry gevra. Elke oggend as ek bid vra ek vir die Here help my dat ek nie weer awe-regs is met die kinders nie. Jo, dan is ek nou eers awe-regs. Dan is ek sommer te rof met die kinders.”

**Subcategory:  
Negativity towards  
learners**

Labelling  
Suppressed anger  
towards learners  
Violent thoughts  
Shock/disgust  
Sceptical,  
unforgiving towards  
violators

“I don’t really want to mention it but he deserved it. He had it coming to him. If I had my way I would punch him with another scissor. In Afrikaans praat ons van ingeslukte woede (repressed anger), ek moet my in toom hou. Daar is van hulle wat op ‘n dag sal jy sien, o, die een is sommer baie kwaad. Wat het gebeur en dan is dit nou asof jy ‘n prop uitgetrek het, spoeg alles net so uit. I was so mad, I just went to sit. I’m so disgusted about their attitude on the way forward in life. I feel at a loss ... and I’m very disappointed actually that our learners should act like this, because ...I don’t mind the personal apology, because it’s just a mumbling of words, there is no meaning behind it. I said: Don’t tell me you are sorry, you know you don’t mean it. This is now the very same guy who smacked that teacher. She (the teacher) didn’t see it and fell over it and broke her shoulder. (Did he do it on purpose?) Yes, he did it on purpose!”

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<p><b>Subcategory:</b>  <b>Failed by the system</b>          No help from the system            Don't trust the system            No support from the system</p>	<p>The participant didn't always clearly distinguish between support by the Department of Education and the School Management. It seems that she was disappointed in both and had no trust in them to support teachers who had to teach in an atmosphere of violence. Yet she refers to an incident where the Department of Education overruled the actions of the School Management indicating that the two systems did not function in support of each other. She calls any authority in the educational system 'the powers that be'.</p>	<p>"I don't feel I can take it to the powers that be (Management/Department of Education), because I knew nothing will come of it, they would rather ask me what did you do to provoke this child? I don't have trust in the system at all. It is very disheartening because we all know the system. Verlede jaar het skool Y 'n hofbevel gekry om 'n kind uit die skool te sit. Die Onderwys Departement het daardie hofbevel laat omkeer. Die hoof is gedwing om daai kind terug te neem in die skool in. In die ou dae as jy iemand skors, het hy by geen ander skool ingekom nie. Vandag moet hulle jou maar net terugneem en hulle maak van jou 'n held. I know I don't feel safe, I know I don't have the backing. Kyk nou in die klas vandag ek kan dinge rapporteer, maar die Onderwys Departement wil nie beskuldig word nie. Hulle kan 'n groot lawaai opskop, maar hulle gaan eerder aandag gee aan netelige sake as wat hulle die groot goed aanspreek. Hulle sien net daai swart kolletjie op die wit laken."</p>
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<p><b>Subcategory:</b>  <b>Low self worth</b>          Hurt feelings          Disillusioned          Hands tied, can't help (defend) themselves          Victims</p>	<p>The participant would from time to time portray the teachers as suffering, disabled victims of violence, within an unsupportive system.</p>	<p>"Ek weet van my kollegas trek swaar, baie swaar, deur hulle optrede, hulle is nie violent deur vuis te slaan nie, maar deur hulle insolence, the arrogance, the way they are talking to you, dit alles maak die leerkragte seer. Nee, die onderwysers se hande is afgekap, en ek herhaal weer, ons wil nie die kinders doodslaan nie, maar ons moet érens vir hulle kan sê:, Oor hierdie streep kom jy nie. I'm just there to do a job. I don't know what I feel like! I'm very disillusioned and I haven't given it thought, What do I feel like? I know I don't feel safe, I know I don't have the backing, like this</p>
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		<p>thing that happened last Thursday (assault on her). will not report it because I know nothing will come from it and I will be the big fool because the learners also know, Aag you can go report me, nothing will come of it. Ons is magteloos. Ja, dis hartverskeurend,- hulle jou, jou uit. Hulle maak van jou 'n swakkeling in die groep as jy nie maak soos wat hulle sê nie. As jy (as leerder) nie doen wat hulle sê nie, maak hulle van jou 'n randeier.”</p>
<p><b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Traumatised</b> Fear / Unsafe At a loss Unnerved</p> <p>Detached from violent learner (Ignore)</p>	<p>The participant displayed many symptoms of a person that has been traumatised and was unsettled by the violence she experienced at school.</p> <p>Being traumatised by the violent incident the participant followed a natural defence mechanism by ignoring the learner.</p>	<p>“No! No! Not since that boy. No, I don't feel safe, I don't know who to turn to. I don't even think I want to turn to anybody because this is what happens throughout the whole country. I know I don't feel safe...I was unnerved, I went to Mr. X . At first I wanted to get a male teacher to take that child out of my class.”</p> <p>“At the end of the period he came up to me, I didn't even look at him. Trying to do what is right, Friday (next day) I walked into my class, I didn't do anything. Monday I was in my class, Tuesday ... Monday he came up to me and he brought me his book, because I was signing all the books. He put his book here next to me, I didn't even look at him. I didn't look at the book. I think, let me ignore them, I don't even look at them.”</p>
<p><b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Resilience</b> See teaching as a higher calling</p> <p>Born to teach Overcome</p>	<p>The participant, although severely traumatised by the violence she experiences at school, still has the belief that she is able to overcome the difficult circumstances.</p>	<p>But I am sure the person in me is much stronger than I am acting out now, and is going to overcome this horrible feeling that I have now, because I must be fair to that child. I must teach that child. I know I will get my management (conflict management) back, and I am going to teach that boy, the learners in that class by my actions. I have already done the wrong thing, this</p>



I am stronger

I will get back

afternoon I didn't let them pray when they left. I will be able to manage this conflict. I know with the help of God I am going to manage this conflict, because God won't let me down. I want to be there, because I want to be a light to shine for Thee, and I cannot be that light while I'm in this conflict, this turmoil, this horrible feeling that I have. As ek oor my jare (in die onderwys) nou dink en ek weet ek is 'n gebore onderwyseres, ek het onder die moeilikste omstandighede, as gevolg van dit wat die land vir ons gegee het ek onderwys gegee. Ek is lief vir die onderwys. Ek sê vir 'n leerder ek glo jy het potensiaal en ek wil hê jy moet iets maak van daardie potensiaal. Weet jy apartheid het van my 'n sterker mens gemaak, maar ons het altyd so aan die agter-speen gesuig. As ek daardie huisies kyk wat in Krugersdorp gebou is ...armoede ... uit daai swart modder het die mooiste lelies gegroei, nou sê jy maar net vir die kinders as jy êrens wil kom."

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**Category: Contributing factors**

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**Subcategory:  
Disciplinary style  
in classroom**

The participant often admits to being very strict when it comes to discipline; she blames some of the other educators for allowing too much in the class; she also admits that she sometimes gives up on her discipline style.

Bending over  
backwards

Too liberal

"Our learners are too liberal and there are some people, I told some teachers at my school they are to blame because they lean over too far. Bend over too far and they (learners) expect all of us to bend over. Bend over so far and we are sending a very poor citizen into this world. Even in the whole set-up of the New South Africa, I still believe there are people who have the say, and you just have to nod and do what is required of you."

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**Subcategory:**  
**Poor support by system**

Although this was also included in the emotional experience of the educator as being failed by the system, it is also seen by the participant as contributing to violence, due to the message it sends out to the educators and learners. The message is that of no consequences for violence.

The inadequate feedback from the disciplinary system, as part of the system, is contributing to the persistence of violence.

“Nothing can come of it, nothing will come of it! It’s a waste of time, I don’t know. Yes it’s a waste of time reporting it. I don’t have trust in the system at all. Ag man I can do what I like, I can throw that teacher into her chair, I can actually hit her, nothing will come of it. I will still come out smelling right like a rose. So there were two or three that took advantage of it.”

“It is very disheartening, because we all know the system. One of my colleagues wanted to lay a charge against a boy who slapped her. That ‘chappy’ had to go to court and everything. I can’t remember what the ruling was in the court, but I know that they said, if you make one more mistake we are going to expel you. Up till now that very same chap, at one stage I confiscated a form from him. The form had a question on it to fill in: What should I have done? He wrote, I should have raped Mrs. E. That I reported..., I didn’t get any feedback.”

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**Subcategory:**  
**Role of media**  
Schools want to keep violence out of the media  
Violence in the media discourages teachers

The following statements underline the fact that the participant is influenced by the important role that the media plays with regard to school violence. She, however, doesn’t refer to its possible role in instilling violent behaviour in students.

“Because they want to keep it out of the newspapers, while I was advised to lay a charge or claim against this guy. And then I thought, I am just another cog in this big wheel, let me not bother. I get the Beeld (newspaper) everyday and when I open - jislaaik, dis net bloedvergieting, as jy die koerant klaar gelees het voel jy magteloos, ek voel so magteloos. Ja, kyk nou net weer gister se geval. ‘n Outjie is by die skool met ‘n rewolwer gekry. Daar was ook ‘n ander een waar die een die ander een te lyf gegaan het en gesteek het. Wanneer was daardie swaard moord?” (Participant referred to recent events in media)

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<p><b>Subcategory:</b>  <b>Unequipped to deal with violence</b>  Lack of training  Unsure of how to react</p>	<p>The following statements clearly show that the participant experiences herself as unequipped to deal with violence.</p>	<p>“I, as a teacher, don’t know how to react. Absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing. I just react as what experience has taught me. We were just taken and jumped in at the deep end, and had to swim and get out, this works for me, this doesn’t work.”</p>
<p><b>Subcategory:</b>  <b>Conflict management</b>  Sin-bin  Spitefulness</p>	<p>The participant doesn’t believe in the way she handles conflict. She experiences personal conflict in the preferred sin-bin method used by many educators to resolve conflict with learners. She refers to the sin-bin to which learners are sent, without explanation, in order to restore order in the classroom.</p> <p>The following are examples where labelling of learners, as outlet to frustration, take place. The participant made it very clear that no labelling takes place based on academic performance, but purely on behaviour.</p>	<p>“I see someone like Mrs. M they just pick them up and send them to the sin-bin, which I don’t think I want to do, but for some of the learners since Monday, I just decided hey sin-bin. Go to the sin-bin, go to the sin-bin, I am now taking the easy way out instead of being constructive, trying to teach these students something about their attitude, not about the work. Go to the sin-bin, go to the sin-bin, I don’t have to deal with you, which is wrong.</p> <p>Which I feel is not right, but for my sanity, that is what I have to do. I use to be a very good conflict manager, and at this stage I don’t know what went wrong that I cannot manage my own conflict with some of the learners. Its so much less hassle, you don’t say anything that can eventually be used against you, you just send them to the sin-bin. She makes horribly good use of the sin-bin.”</p> <p>“And we have to realize, I don’t want the child to have 80% and then he is a rotter, I want him to be a person worthy of that 80%. Unfortunately it doesn’t happen. Those who are 80 percenters are really worthy persons, but these other little rotters, hell. You see every time I have Gr. 9, I have Gr. 10, I have Gr. 11 and you find in every one of those classes the poor performers are the ones who are most disruptive. They are the most</p>

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Swearing to voice frustration	The following are examples where swearing at learners, take place.	arrogant, they are the most insolent.” “Ek kan ook vloek, kan ek dit nie help nie, partykeer kom hul na my toe dan sê ek. ‘Hey vitsek’ ek bedoel nie regtig voertsek nie, net om uiting te gee aan wat ek op daardie oomblik voel. Ja, maar ek weet, ek kan in groot moeilikheid land vir dit wat ek uitlaat en niemand gaan in die moeilikheid beland vir dit wat opgebou het dat ek dit gesê het nie. En ek voel nie daar is so woord nie, want ek sê nie soos hy gestel word nie, ek maak my eie woord en dit is kort en kragtig. Ek glo nie ek vloek hulle nie, dit is net ‘n uitdrukking.”
<b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Teaching profession becomes uninviting</b>	Experience shows that the youth look down on teaching as a profession and as a result of this fewer people are interested in teaching as a career.	Hulle (jongmense) weet dat die onderwyser se outoriteit wat ons gehad het bestaan nie meer nie, daarom is daar so min van ons jong mense wat in die onderwys wil kom. Want hulle (jong-mense) voel die juffrou, kyk hoe takel hulle haar af. Nee, ek kan dit nie vat nie. Of jy kry iemand wat sê ek is baie kort van draad, ek sal elke dag moet tronk toe gaan as ek moet onderwys gee. Aan die begin van die jaar het ek beurse kon reël vir onderwysstudente wat nie geld gehad het vir studies nie. Met die klomp wat ons gesien het vir onderwysstudies het net twee kom aansoek doen. Vir die afgelope 4 tot 5 jaar het ons geen aansoeke gehad nie.
<b>Subcategory:</b> <b>Burnout</b> Quitting Tired Illness	It is the experience of the participant that many of her fellow teachers, like herself, feel overburdened by the increasing demand of teaching due to violence and, from time to time, they have considered quitting.	“I will tell a friend of mine, that if I didn’t think so much of myself, I will just take my bag and go, I don’t need to teach. Teacher absentees also result from the intimidation and victimisation. Kyk net ‘n bietjie na mev. L, as jy nou net vir haar bestudeer kan jy alles sien wat jy nou genoem is. Even in haar stemtoon: Sy

is moeg... Weet jy die kinders gaan so ...I am a diabetic, my blood sugar was 25 point something, at that point I can easily burst an artery, because it is a danger to me also. Yes, en nou sluk jy jou woede in en dit veroorsaak daai spastiese kolon.”

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**Category: Preventative strategies**

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**Subcategory:** It seems that there are some teachers who  
**Cultural wisdom** find it possible to cope within the violent teaching environment. To their advantage, they have the knowledge and understanding of the culture of most of the difficult children.

“And they (these teachers) don’t have problems, because they know how these learners should be. They (the learners) are taught, their culture is to respect elderly people, which they don’t. Now these two ladies they are not afraid to act and to react.”

**Subcategory:** Humour may play an important role to  
**Humour** discharge a tense moment, which might have the potential to lead to violence.

“Toe hulle gaan sit toe gryp ek die enetjie en toe sê ek vir hom Mr. Z gaan more weg, ek gaan volgende week jou nek omdraai, so dan gaan nobody wees, where you can report me to. Ons het lekker gelag. Want hy het my eendag gaan aankla by Mr. Z nadat hy my so mal kwaad gemaak het.”

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There would seem to be a gap in the current literature when considering the influence of gambling on school-related violence. No clear evidence of this was found in literature.

As far as gender-related violence is concerned, Mills (2001:3) acknowledges the fact in his article that for many boys being 'tough' was their understanding of what it was to be male. In a patriarchal society, aggressive play by boys towards girls was often described as 'typical' or 'boys will be boys' behaviour and such behaviour was even encouraged. It was the acceptance of this behaviour as being normal that was most damaging in the school environment. It was this use by boys of aggression to gain power and to dominate, which was intimidating and threatening to girls and undermined their whole experience of school. The results of this study suggest that it is also a culture-specific phenomenon that might call for further research. A study conducted at the University of Jerusalem indicated that having a higher percentage of girls in class lowers the level of class disruption and violence (S.A. Jewish Report, 2008).

Recently, South Africa has been the centre of xenophobic attacks. It is therefore not surprising that this is also mentioned as a possible contributor to school violence. Fredericks (2008) confirms this view by reporting on similarly disturbing xenophobic attacks on teachers in schools in the Western Cape. Van Zyl (2008) reports on the link between xenophobia and a lack of emphasis on South Africa's history in schools, and thus not cultivating a sense of pride in learners. The theory of inequality is but one possible way of explaining this type of violence.

#### The teacher's experiences of the nature of violence

The nature of violence at school is primarily experienced as a struggle for power that is gained through physical force, including intimidation, threats and violation of rules. According to Mills (2001:1), petty violence and jockeying for position in the form of pushing and shoving, makes the lives of many teachers in schools miserable.

It must be noted that although the educator as participant did have personal experience of violence towards her, the focus of questioning was not to explore this but rather her general perception of violence at school.

Violence is perceived to be on the increase and more and more directed at the educator as an authority figure, than before. Cangelosi (1988:280-283) suggests four reasons a student may choose to abuse a teacher physically. First, students may feel backed into a corner and feel that striking out at the teacher is the only way to maintain 'face' with peers. Second, the teacher may be in the position of being an accessible target for the student at a moment when the student is reacting angrily. Third, the student may attempt to exert control over authorities, win favour with peers, seek revenge on the one in authority, or relieve boredom, by carrying out a prank that endangers the wellbeing of a teacher. Last, the student may feel obliged to defend himself against the perceived danger that the teacher poses. According to the reported results, the educator experienced violence as occurring in order to exert control over authorities and to win favour with peers as the most common reasons for the violence.

### The teacher's emotional experience of violence

The teacher in this study indicated that she reacts to violence with an overwhelming sense of negativity towards the learners, especially those who are seen as perpetrators of violence. The negativity takes the form of ignoring the learners. There is also a lack of motivation to assist learners within the learning environment. Astor *et al.* (1996:345) mentioned that negative social attribution cycles between peers, teachers, and highly aggressive children may contribute to the perpetuation of violence in the school setting. Feeling overwhelmed by this might in fact contribute to violence. Osher, VanAcker, Morrison, Gable, Dwyer and Quinn (2004:17) remark that if a teacher, feeling overwhelmed by a large class, uses a stern or loud voice to call a child's name, that child is likely to internalise the communication as rejection, criticism, failure, and punishment. This might then contribute to the learner reacting violently.

Symptoms of trauma are clearly seen in the verbatim responses, especially through anger experienced towards the learner. In the analysed data, feelings of disgust and revenge could be identified. The following emotional responses can be linked to the traumatising effect of the school violence: a perception of fear, a low self-worth and a feeling of immense guilt in the way she is responding to the violence. Walsh (1998:29) warns that a traumatic incident like school violence can cause major organisational disruption and individual distress in the workplace and that comprehensive management is required to maintain the function of both the organisation and the individual. The results have further shown that the educator experiences the general inability of the educational support systems to support teachers. This perceived failure is specifically in connection with discipline and the enforcement of acceptable practices in the classroom and on the school grounds.

It was found that despite the many negative perceptions, the educator perceived teaching as a calling and experienced it as a life mission, attributing personal purpose as being connected to a deeper, spiritual meaning. The expressed resilience contributed to perseverance in the teaching profession, despite difficult circumstances.

### The teacher's experiences of the factors contributing to violence

The poor support from school as well as community systems, together with an inconsistent disciplinary style that teachers use in the classroom, are perceived as the main contributing factors to the escalating violence in the school context. This influences conflict management and contributes further to violence. Rademeyer (2008c) remarks that the general perception of educators is that there is a lack of support from the provincial educational departments. A recent incident is mentioned in which the provincial government's refusal to expel learners from a school was overturned by the high court. Mahlangu (Rademeyer, 2008c) mentions that the inconsistency in the disciplinary system can be seen in practice because some schools negotiate with misbehaving learners, while others try to expel them.

The media influences teachers in two ways that contribute to their increased experience of violence: First, it makes them reluctant to deal with or

expose violence, as many schools are afraid they may end up on the front pages of the newspapers. Teachers who do stand up against troublemakers are often regarded in the media as violators of children's rights. Often, such teachers were only doing the job of enforcing school rules and acting against troublemakers (Rademeyer, 2008b). As a result of this, teachers do not act, and this can be perceived as an even worse scenario.

Second, the media has contributed to making more teachers aware of violence at schools. It would seem that such reporting contributes to teachers collaboratively sharing the similar experiences, and rapidly magnifying the perception of increased violence.

Poor conflict management strategies are reported and a feeling of not being adequately equipped to deal with violence at school. Keller and Tapasak (2004:105) remark that the application of effective teaching skills (including conflict management) serves a dual purpose. It prevents feelings of frustration with learning, fear of failure and other possible academically-related antecedents to aggression and violence.

Conflict management should, therefore, start long before conflict has time to present itself (Striepling-Goldstein, 2004:29). Keller and Tapasak (2004: 111) suggest that since problems associated with violence and teaching can be highly complex, teachers must be flexible and creative problem solvers.

#### The teacher's experiences of the results of violence

Teacher burnout and the lack of interest among young people in pursuing a teaching career result directly from the violence experienced at school. Oosthuizen (as cited in Rademeyer, 2008a) is of the opinion that due to the extent of discipline problems in our schools, teachers are in dire need of help.

#### The teacher's experiences of preventative strategies

It is asserted that cultural awareness, knowledge and understanding referred to in this study as cultural wisdom, may contribute to the prevention of violence at school and, more specifically, in the class environment.

Humour can 'funnily enough' also contribute to preventing violence from escalating, as it serves to release tension. Some teachers might be able to use this as an effective strategy for preventing violence. Rademeyer (2008c) mentions that although humour can prevent a difficult situation from getting out of hand, teachers must avoid sarcasm as that has the opposite effect on a situation.

#### **Concluding comments**

The aim of this study was to gain an insight into the experiences of a secondary school educator with regard to violence at her school. The main limitation of this study is the sample size in that it reports on the experiences of only one educator who finds herself in a very specific context and emotional state. Nevertheless, the authors of this article are of the opinion that it provides a rich description of the subjective experiences of an educator and gives an insight into the complexities of the various nuances violence creates in her school system. Perhaps the potential solution to understanding a dysfunc-



tional school system afflicted with incidents of violence could be unlocked by gaining insight into and understanding of the experiences of those individuals who daily traverse the system.

The results of this study indicated that the educator experienced violence in her school as a harsh reality that affected her functioning as an educator on many levels. The educator identified various causes of violence in her school and intimated that factors such as, academic tension, retaliation against intimidation and bullying, no repercussions for undesirable behaviour and violence, gangster related activities, violence in society, prejudiced behaviour, alcohol and gambling were at the heart of the problem and were major causes of violence in her school. As a result, the educator feels unsafe in her school and is fearful of those whom she aspires to educate. She expressed an urgent need for support from the school system and specifically school management and government, and expressed a need for guidance on how to deal effectively with violence in her class and school environment.

The findings of this study portray an educator who finds herself in crisis due to a perceived lack of support and because she is ill-equipped to face the new challenges of educating violent learners. It is highly relevant that we take note of the deepening crisis in our education system, which in this study is expressed through the subjective experiences of this educator. It seems important to note that this educator has a perception that perpetrators of violence in schools have become untouchable and that few consequences follow unacceptable violent behaviour. Educators need more clarity on their rights and responsibilities and on how to act in situations of violent contact with their learners. Furthermore, disciplinary support mechanisms on the part of school governance need to be investigated to clarify their effectiveness and to determine if they really accomplish what they set out to do, namely, to support educators in their complex task of maintaining discipline in our schools.

The experiences of this educator resonate with recent reports in the media on violence in schools that could potentially extrapolate her experiences to the larger educator corps. This could possibly facilitate an understanding that our educators are human beings with particular needs and limitations. They are a vulnerable group at risk of feeling de-motivated and possibly burnt-out.

This study highlights the need for further research on the phenomenon of escalating violence in schools. Further studies could include for example, comparative case studies of various educators in a variety of school environments; survey studies which could be representative of a larger population of educators; studies that could explore the relationship between violence and educator discipline styles and studies to explore the experiences of learners regarding violence in their schools.

As the researchers of this case study, we express the hope that it will contribute to a better understanding of the lived experiences of educators who are faced with educating violent learners.

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## Authors

Suzanne Bester is Supervisor of clinical training at the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Pretoria. She has published widely and her research interests are in life design and psychological assessment practices.

Alfred du Plessis is a registered educational psychologist in full-time practice.

