



Tata Institute
of
Social Sciences

THE
INDIAN JOURNAL
OF
SOCIAL WORK

Volume 71, Issue 3
July 2010

ARTICLES

Perceived Prevalence, Determinants and Preventive Strategies for Violence-Related Behaviours Among South African High School Children

A Survey Among Teachers in Rural Vhembe District

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The trend in violent acts in South African schools since independence has shown a steady rise, and the situation only continues to get worse. The litany of violent crimes in schools in the recent past alone is a sign that the situation is not abating. For example, in the past months, many students and other individuals have either been seriously injured or murdered by other students. The study seeks to determine teachers' perceived prevalence, determinants and preventive strategies for interpersonal violent behaviour in secondary schools within Vhembe District. The study uses a quantitative cross-sectional design and all the teachers in the 10 randomly selected schools were eligible to participate in the study. The instrument of data collection was a questionnaire and the data was analysed descriptively using the SPSS. The study showed that the causes of violent behaviour in the schools included in the study are multi-faceted and, therefore, the strategies to address the problem must also operate at a variety of levels.

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INTRODUCTION

Earls, Cairns and Mercy (1993) observed that in everyday usage, violence refers to the exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse, while

interpersonal violence refers to a class of actions that have qualitatively different consequences from other social behaviours, namely, the intentional infliction of pain and injury through physical force. The *Report of the Surgeon General* (US Surgeon General, 2007) explained that violent behaviour among the youth can be defined as behavioural patterns marked by aggressiveness, antisocial behaviour, verbal abuse and externalising, that is, the acting of feelings. The focus of this study is not on violence in general, but interpersonal violence with specific reference to physical fighting and other anti-social behaviours, such as bullying and harassing. Pickett, Craig, Harel, Cunnigham, Simpson, Molcho, Mazur, Dostaler, Overpeck and Currie (2005) refer to physical fighting as a manifestation of interpersonal violence among adolescents which, according to the US Surgeon General (2007), may be characterised by violent physical interactions such as hitting, slapping, and fist fighting. Bullying is a repeated pattern of aggressive behaviour directed towards another person who has less status or power (Rigby, 1997). Aggression in the case of bullying may not necessarily be physical but may take the form of emotional and verbal abuse, threats, as well as exclusion in which a person directly or indirectly ostracises another person from a social group (Delfabbro, Winefield, Trainor, Dollard, Anderson, Metzger and Hammarstrom, 2006).

Several causes and risk factors are associated with interpersonal violence among students. Talking Points (2007) categorised the causes and risk factors of school violence as follows:

- *Access to weapons*, whereby teens acquire and carry guns.
- *Cyber and television abuse*: Students who have access to violent video games and watch violent films on television hold more 'pro-violent attitudes'.
- *Influence of school environment*: In some schools, drugs are being sold and there are gangs and negative peer influence is an issue. The size of the school is also a risk factor as large schools tend to experience discipline problem.
- *Community environment*: As with schools and families, communities can neglect their children. If a community is not responsive to the needs of families and their children, this neglect can develop into violence.
- *Family environment*: Although, culturally, parents are expected to deal with childhood problems, the challenges facing many parents make it difficult for them to meet all their children's need. If parents

fail to nurture and reinforce positive behaviour, children may exhibit violent behaviour patterns in the school.

According to Rudatsikira, Siziya, Kazembe and Muula (2007), interpersonal violence is an important global health problem. The economic burden of interpersonal violence in some countries is estimated to be about 4% of the gross national product (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi and Lozano, 2002). Globally, interpersonal violence is ranked as the fifth leading cause of death in 15–44 years age group and the proportion of 13-year olds that report engaging in bullying once a week ranges from 1.2% in England and Sweden to 7.6% in the United States of America (USA) to 9.7% in Latvia (Mercy, Butchart, Farrington and Cerda, 2002). A study in Malaysia (Lai-Kah, Chen and Kick-Kit, 2007) shows that in 2001, 27.9% of adolescents in the age group of 12–19 years had been involved in a physical fight within the last 12 months preceding the survey. In Namibia, Rudatsikira and others (2007) found that of the 6,283 respondents, 50.6% (55.2% males and 46.2% females) reported having been in a physical fight in the past 12 months.

African countries, south of the Sahara, currently face a number of problems, such as high unemployment, persistent poverty, the HIV/AIDS burden, and high crime rate. The profound impact of high crime rate on a society cannot be underestimated. Violent crime creates serious human tragedy and can seriously impact negatively on socioeconomic development. According to Roopnarain (1999), violent crime is currently South African's most pressing problem which is affecting every sector of the population. Roopnarain (1999) observed that the discussion of 'endemic' violence conveys the premise that such violence is widespread, common, and deeply entrenched in most societies. It is so prevalent and widely tolerated that it has come to be perceived almost as normative and to a large extent accepted rather than challenged. Masuku (2002) categorised violent crime into (i) interpersonal violent crime, which refers to murder, attempted murder, serious and common assaults, and rape; and (ii) violent property crime which includes all categories of robbery. According to Masuku (2002), between 1994–1995 and 2000–2001, violent crime increased by 33%, in South Africa, the highest increase in any crime category.

Since education and educational structures are not excluded from the stress and challenges that are being experienced by individuals in South African society, today, aggression and violent crime has also become a major problem in South African schools (Poggenpoel and Myburgh, 2006). However, one can observe that school violence is an issue in most

countries of the world. According to Galand, Lecocq and Philippot (2007), school violence is a growing concern in many Western countries and studies about this are flourishing. For example, with regards to the USA, there were 32 school-associated violent deaths between July 1, 1999, and June 30, 2000, 16 of which involved children of school-going age. In 2003, 5% of students in the USA, aged 12–18 years reported being victims of non-fatal crimes, 4% reported being victims of theft, and 1% reported being victims of violent incidents (US Department of Education, 2004). The latest report of the Surgeon General also detailed the nature and extent of youth violence in schools in the USA (US Surgeon General, 2007).

The trend in violent acts in South African schools since independence has shown a steady rise and to date, the situation continues to get worse. The series of violent crimes in the schools in recent past alone is a sign that the situation is not abating. For example, in the past months, many students and other individuals have either been seriously injured or murdered by students. The following account from the *Daily Sun* shows the extent of the problem: drunken kids run wild (August 23, 2007); pupils burn gogos (September 6, 2007); the real blame for the children who dance with demons: their parents (September 17, 2007); they stabbed him seven times (September 20, 2007); accused kids (for murder) out on bail (September 21, 2007); schoolboy stabbed while praying (September 25, 2007); pupil charged with school girl's murder (October 3, 2007); and 'why did you kill my son?' (October 11, 2007). During the 8 o'clock news by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) on December 19, 2007, a statement was made that nowadays, in schools, the machete seemed to be mightier than the pen. This was in reference to an incident whereby a 16-year old boy was murdered by one of his colleagues over an argument on 2 Rands (about 25 American cents) during a game of gambling.

According to Felson and Tedeschi (1993), the forms of aggression in schools include: acts of hitting, hurting and shoving, injuring, irritating, unprovoked physical aggression, and mildly provoked verbal aggression. An account of violence in South African schools given by Vally, Dolombisa and Porteus (1999) shows that murder is a major outcome of violence in the schools. According to Vally and others (1999), in the past three months alone, educators, parents and students alike have been murdered in schools:

- a school principal was murdered in Soweto;
- a pre-school teacher was murdered in full view of 60 children in Gauteng;

- Rose Mnisi was murdered as she walked home from her school in the Northern Province;
- a school bus driver was murdered in the presence of 85 learners;
- a Grade 12 pupil was stabbed by a fellow student; and
- a parent was shot while waiting in his car for his daughter outside her secondary school.

Rationale for the Study

According to Galand and others (2007), in spite of the fact that there are many studies on school violence, most of them have focused almost exclusively on students. Consequently, precursors and consequences of violence experienced by teachers are less documented (Lorion, 1998). Nicolaidis, Toda and Smith (2002) observed that in most studies, teachers are considered as a source of information about student behaviour or as implementers of programmes, but are rarely considered as witnesses or victims of school violence. Judging from available literature, one can observe that in South Africa, like other developing African countries, studies on school violence in all its dimensions are rare. Available literature on this subject appears to be more of discussion papers than research-based information. For example, a paper by Mogano (1993) analysed some of the dynamics that shape the character and intensity of violent behaviour in black schools, particularly after February 1990. Teachers play a significant role in the management and administration of schools. Therefore, it is important to understand their views on the subject matter. The aim of this study is to explore and assess the school teachers' perceived prevalence and determinants of violent behaviour in schools within Vhembe District and their perceived strategies for dealing with the problem.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional design. The design was used because the study seeks to measure the size of school violence in a district, including its determinants and preventive measures.

Setting

Vhembe is one of the 6 districts of Limpopo province of South Africa. It is the northernmost district of the country and is located in a rural

setting. The seat of Vhembe is Thohoyandou and the majority of its 1,199,856 people speak Venda. The other major languages being spoken in the district are Tsonga, Northern Sotho and Afrikaans. The district is made up of four local municipalities: Thulamela, Makhado, Mutale and Musina.

Sample and Sampling Method

The Education Department of Vhembe District was approached to obtain information about the number and distribution of schools in the district. The information obtained showed that the district is divided into 27 circuits, with each circuit supervising varying number of secondary schools. Of the 27 circuits, eight were said to be inaccessible by car due to bad terrain of the road and they were thus removed from the list. Since the researchers were not able to cover all the schools in the remaining 19 circuits, a two-stage probability sampling technique was used to select 10 schools. In the first stage, the 19 circuits were divided into two according to their setting, whether semi-rural or rural. Of the 19 circuits, the six that were based in rapidly developing towns/locations were categorised as 'semi-rural', while the remaining 13 were categorised as 'rural'. In order to ensure proportional representation of the schools, four circuits were selected by balloting from the six in the semi-rural category, while six circuits were selected by balloting from the 13 remaining ones (that is, the rural category). In the next stage, the list of all the schools in each of the 10 selected circuits was compiled and from each circuit, one school was selected by balloting.

The Instrument

Due to the fact that the researchers could not identify an existing tool on this topic, the questionnaire for the survey was developed by the researchers based on information gathered from literature review on the variables of interest to the study. The tool, which comprises both structured and semi-structured questions as well as Likert-scale items, had five sections: demography, variables on the prevalence of interpersonal violence in the schools, perceived determinants/causes of interpersonal violence in schools, respondents' personal experience regarding violent behaviour in their schools, and perceived preventive measures. A pre-test was carried out in order to assess the appropriateness of the tool.

Data Collection and Analysis

Considering the fact that the respondents were all teachers, the questionnaire was self-completed. In order to ensure that there was no exchange of ideas, the respondents were expected to complete the questionnaire and return it immediately. Towards this end, after permission was granted by the school authorities, the teachers were approached by the investigators to fix a date for data collection. On the appointed date, except in few instances when the respondents asked for more time to complete the questionnaires, all the copies were collected back immediately.

Analysis of the questionnaire was done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The database was used to obtain the frequency distribution of the variables and to carry out descriptive analysis.

Ethical Issues

In order to obtain ethical clearance to carry out the study, the proposal— together with a completed ethical clearance form—was submitted to the Directorate of Research and Innovation of the University of Venda and an ethical clearance certificate was obtained. Following this, the Vhembe District Council issued a letter of permission, which was taken to each of the Circuits that oversee the activities of the 10 randomly selected schools. With the approval of the circuit authorities, the principals of the selected schools were approached to seek approval. Consent was, thereafter, obtained from the teachers and only those who agreed to participate were recruited into the study.

RESULTS

Demography

In all, there were 136 respondents (76 males and 60 females). One hundred and nineteen (80.2%) respondents were between the age of 35 and 54 years. Of the 41 respondents who were between the age group 45–54 years, 27 (65.9%) were males, while eight (72.7%) of those who were 55 years and above were also males. One hundred and thirty-two (97.1%) were South Africans. One hundred and thirty-five (91.7%) had spent more than two years in their respective schools. The gender distribution shows that of the 29 respondents who had spent between five and nine years in their schools, 18 (63%) were females. Forty (66.7%) of those who had spent more than nine years in the schools were males. Of the 136 respondents, 80 (58.8%) were working in schools situated in semi-rural communities; and 35 (62.5%) of those working in rural settings were males.

Perceived Frequency of Occurrence of Violent Behaviours among their Students

Tables 1 and 2 respectively show the distribution of the respondents according to their perceived frequency of occurrence of certain behaviours often characterised as being violent. Due to some missing data in this section of the questionnaire, the 'n' varied slightly from one variable to the other. With regards to physical fighting, 49.3% of the male teachers and 42.4% of the females thought that it often happened between two or more male students compared to 20.3% of the males and 32.2% of the females who felt that it often happened between two or more female students. Only 16% of the males and 22% of the females thought that physical fighting often happens between a male and a female student.

The distribution, according to the frequency of bullying as a behaviour pattern, shows that 57.3% of male teachers and 57.6 % of their female counterparts felt that often, a male student could be seen bullying another male student. Conversely, only 28.4% of the male respondents and 31 % of the females felt that often, a female student could be observed to be bullying another female student. The result shows that 33.3% and 47.4% of the male and female respondents, respectively, thought that often, a male student could be seen bullying a female student as compared to 13.5% of the males and 22% females who thought that female students could often be seen bullying a male student. The results with regard to the use of dangerous weapons by the students are shown on Table 2. It is however worthy of note that 33.3% of the male and 20.3% of the female respondents said that seldomly, a student could be observed using a knife or sharp object in the school premises. The use of guns in schools was considered to be a rare occurrence or that it never happened (96% of the males and 93.2% of the female respondents).

Three variables—assault, swearing and rape—were examined in Table 3. With regard to assault, 33.8% of the male and 31.7% of the female respondents felt that in few occasions (that is, seldomly), one could witness a situation whereby a student intentionally inflicted serious injury on another student through physical force. Furthermore, of the study group, 31% of the males and 40.7% of the females perceived that seldomly a student could be observed either assaulting or threatening to assault a teacher. The distribution with regard to swearing shows that of all the variables examined in the section (that is, a male student either swearing/cursing at another male or female student; or a female student

TABLE 1
Percentage Distribution of Respondents regarding Frequency of Occurrence of Physical Fighting, Bullying and the Use of Dangerous Weapons by Gender

Variables	Males				Females			
	N	Never	Seldom	Often	N	Never	Seldom	Often
Physical Fighting								
Between 2 or more male students	75	9.3%	41.3%	49.3%	59	15.3%	42.4%	42.4%
Between 2 or more female students	74	27.0%	52.7%	20.3%	59	30.5%	37.3%	32.2%
Between a male and a female student	75	25.3%	58.7%	16.0%	59	32.2%	45.8%	22.0%
Between students and community members	74	74.3%	21.6%	4.1%	59	61.0%	33.9%	5.1%
Bullying								
A male student bullying another male student	75	8.0%	34.7%	57.3%	59	18.6%	23.7%	57.6%
A male student bullying a female student	75	12.0%	54.7%	33.3%	57	22.8%	29.8%	47.4%
A female student bullying another female student	74	23.0%	48.6%	28.4%	58	22.4%	46.6%	31.0%
A female student bullying a male student	74	47.3%	39.2%	13.5%	59	44.1%	33.9%	22.0%
Use of Dangerous Weapons								
A student using knife/sharp object	75	58.7%	33.3%	8.0%	59	71.2%	20.3%	8.5%
A student using a gun during fighting	75	96.0%	2.7%	1.3%	59	93.2%	6.8%	0.0%

TABLE 2
Percentage Distribution of the Respondents regarding the Occurrence of Assault, Swearing and Rape
among their Students by Gender

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Males</i>				<i>Females</i>			
	<i>N</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>Often</i>
Assault								
A student beating a fellow student terribly	74	59.5%	33.8%	6.8%	60	53.3%	31.7%	15.0%
A student assaulting or threatening to assault a teacher	71	60.6%	1.0%	8.5%	60	49.2%	40.7%	10.2%
Swearing								
A male student swearing/cursing another male student	75	13.3%	38.7%	48.0%	60	16.7%	43.3%	40.0%
A male student swearing/cursing a female student	75	13.3%	38.7%	48.0%	60	18.3%	36.7%	45.0%
A female student swearing/cursing another female student	74	10.8%	44.6%	44.6%	60	15.0%	38.3%	46.7%
A female student swearing/cursing a male student	75	16.0%	44.0%	40.0%	59	32.2%	37.3%	30.5%
Rape								
Rape or attempted rape by students	74	90.5%	9.5%	0.0%	60	91.7%	5.0%	3.3%

either swearing/cursing a male or female student), the range 'for often' as a response category varied from 40–48% for the male respondents and 30.5–46.7% for the female respondents. About 90.5% males and 91.7% of the females felt that rape never happened in their schools.

Respondents' Personal Experience with Regards to Students' Violent Behaviour

Table 3 shows the percentage distribution of the teachers with regard to the questions asking them to state whether or not they had personal experience of their students being physically assaulted, bullied or threatened with a dangerous weapon within the last 12 months prior to data collection.

About 92% of the male teachers and 95% of their female counterparts said they had never been physically attacked/assaulted by a male student. With regard to a female student ever attacking them, 95.9% and 95% of the males and females respectively said it had never happened. With regard to bullying, 31.1% of the male respondents and 15% of the females said that they had been bullied, harassed or cursed more than once within the past 12 months by a male student. However, a mean percentage of 84.6 of the total study group stated that they had never been bullied/harassed/cursed by a female student. On whether or not the teachers had ever been threatened with a dangerous weapon, Table 4 shows that whether one was considering a male or a female student, between 91.9 and 100% of the respondents said it had never occurred.

Table 4 covers two variables: sexual assault and psychosocial related experiences. As shown in the table, all the female respondents said they had never been sexually assaulted in any form by either a male or a female student.

Over 95% of the male respondents also stated that they had never experienced any form of sexual assault from any student. Some questions were asked to examine whether the teachers had previously exhibited certain behaviour characteristics due to their psychosocial state as a result of their negative experience based on what they witnessed either being done or said by their students. When asked whether the teachers had ever resulted to flogging a student after being provoked, 34.3% of the male teachers and 17% of the females said that this had happened to them more than once. With regard to the question on whether or not they had, at any time, felt like quitting the school due to the students' observed misconduct, 31.1% of the males and 18.7% of the females said they had experienced this type of feeling more than once. About 95% of the males and 97% of the females said they were

TABLE 3
Percentage Distribution of the Teachers by Gender according to their Experience with Regard to
Students' Violent Behaviour within the last 12 Months

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Males (n=76)</i>				<i>Females (n=60)</i>			
	<i>Never</i>	<i>Once/ Twice</i>	<i>Thrice</i>	<i>More than Four Times</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Once/ Twice</i>	<i>Thrice</i>	<i>More than Four Times</i>
Physical Assault								
Was physically attacked/assaulted by a male student	91.9	6.8	1.4	0.0	95.0	1.7	1.7	1.7
Was physically attacked/assaulted by a female student	95.9	1.4	2.7	0.0	95.0	3.3	0.0	1.7
Bullying								
Was bullied/harassed/cursed by a male student	68.9	21.6	2.7	6.8	85.0	13.3	1.7	0.0
Was bullied/harassed/cursed by a female student	82.4	12.2	1.4	4.1	86.7	13.3	0.0	0.0
Threatened with a Weapon/Sharp Object								
Was threatened with a weapon by a male student	91.9	6.8	1.4	0.0%	96.7	1.7	1.7	0.0
Was threatened with a weapon by a female student	98.6	0.0%	1.4	0.0%	100.0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

TABLE 4
Percentage distribution of Teachers by Gender According to their Experience with Regard to Sexual Assault and Psychosocial Variables in the last 12 months

Variables	Males (n=76)				Females (n=60)			
	Never	Once/ Twice	Thrice	More than Four Times	Never	Once/ Twice	Thrice	More than Four Times
Sexual Assault								
Was sexually assaulted or raped by a male student	97.7	1.4	-	1.4	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Was sexually assaulted or harassed by a female student	95.9	1.4	1.4	1.4	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Psychosocial-related Variables								
Provoked and flogged students	65.8	23.3	5.5	5.5	83.1	15.3	0.0	1.7
Felt like quitting the school because of students' misconduct	68.9	27.0	1.4	2.7	81.4	13.6	1.7	3.4
Smoked/had alcohol because of students' misconduct	94.6	2.7	1.4	1.4	96.6	3.4	0.0	0.0
Experienced depressive symptoms because of students' misconduct	66.2	25.7	2.7	5.4	78.0	15.3	1.7	5.1

never tempted either to smoke or drink alcohol due to the students' bad conduct. On being asked if the respondents had ever experienced depressive symptoms as a response to their students' observed misconduct, 33.8% males (n=76) mentioned that this had happened to them more than once as compared to 22.1% of their female (n=60) counterparts. Details of the results can be found in Table. 4

Respondents' Perceived Causes of Violence in their Schools

Using a semi-structured question, respondents were asked to list six reasons as to why they thought students engaged in violence or physical fighting in school. The responses were clustered under three categories: factors associated directly with the students; factors associated with the family/community environment; and those associated with the school (that is, the teachers/the government). Considering that the responses were cumulative, the 'n' for each of the three categories was calculated separately to prepare the bar charts as shown in Figure 1. Figure 1a shows that the major cause of violence, which can be directly linked to students' behaviour is

FIGURE 1
Distribution of the Respondents According to their Perceived Causes of Violence in their Schools with Specific Reference to Issues related to the Students, Family/Community and the School/Government

Figure 1a

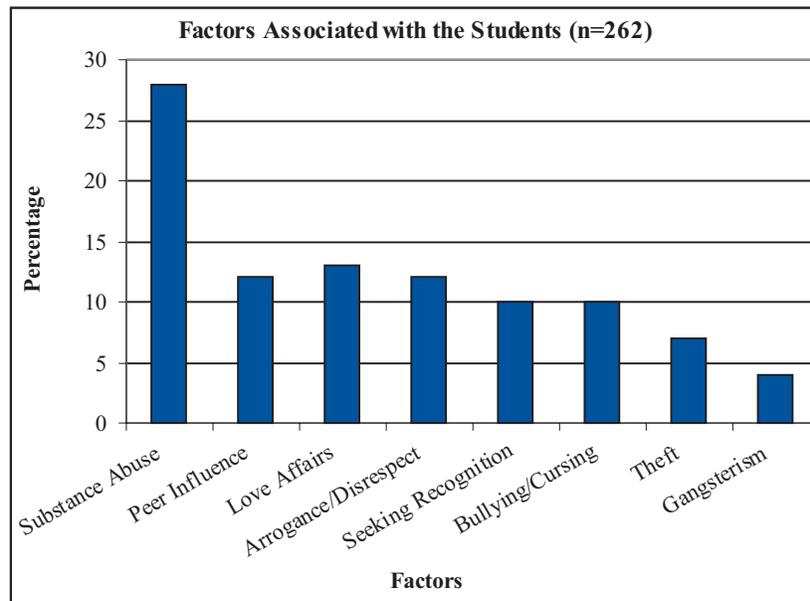


Figure 1b

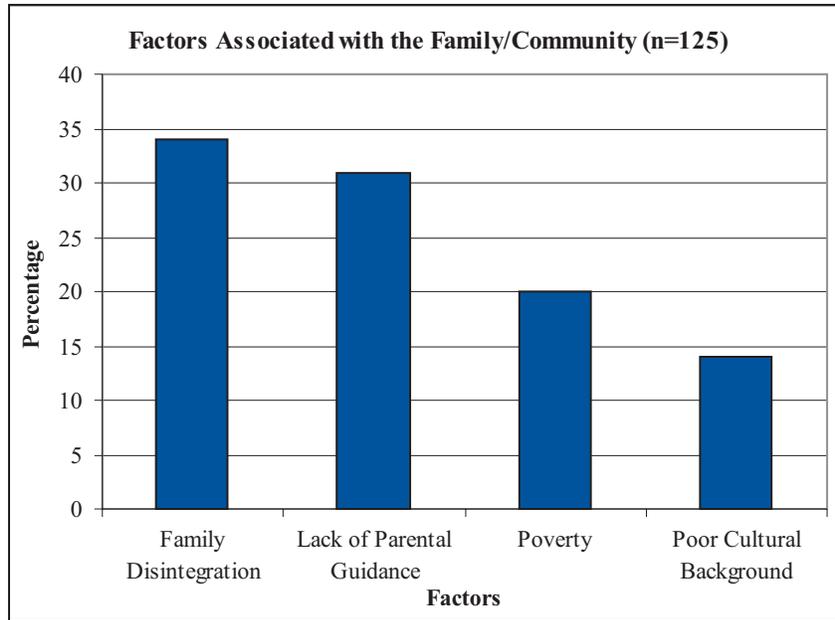
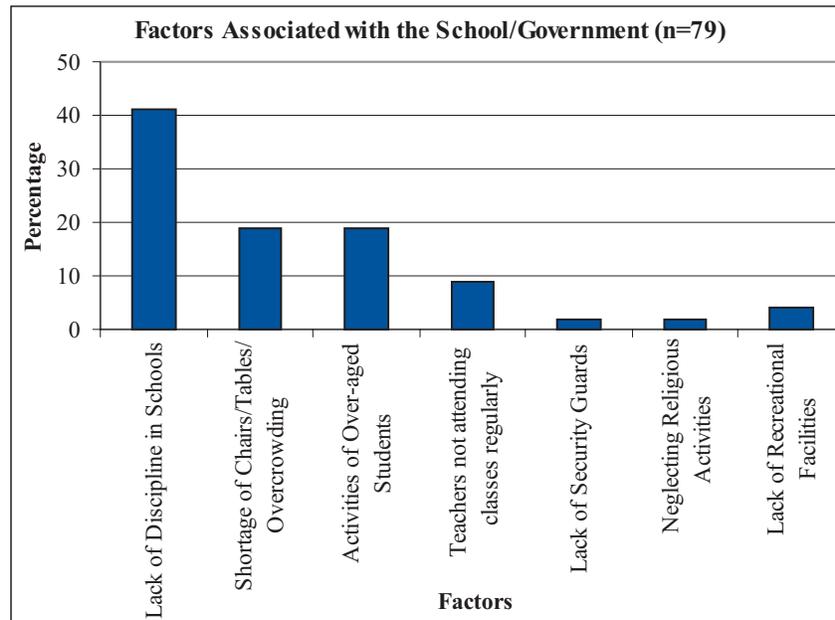


Figure 1c



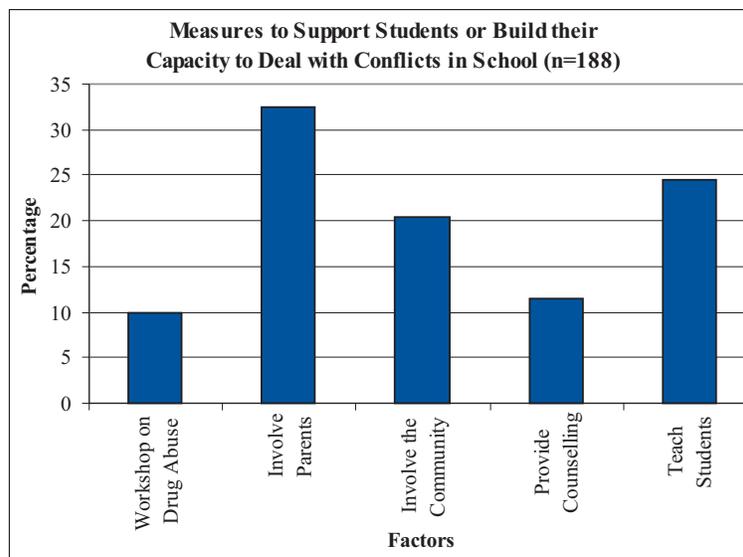
substance abuse (28%), followed by love affairs, arrogance, peer influence, bullying/cursing, seeking recognition and theft. The distribution of those factors related to the students' family background shows the following in descending order: family disintegration, lack of parental guidance, poverty and poor cultural background (Figure 1b). As shown in Figure 1c, several factors were linked to the school and the four most prominent were lack of discipline, overcrowding which is characterised by shortage of chairs and desks, activities of over-aged students, and the issue of teachers not attending classes regularly.

Respondents' Perceived Preventive Measures for School Violence

A semi-structured questionnaire was also used to seek the opinion of the respondents concerning the measures that could be taken to prevent school violence. The teachers were asked to list six measures that should be taken to prevent school violence. The responses were clustered under three categories: the students/family/community, the teachers, and the government. Figure 2a shows that the measures directly focusing on the students, their family or community include:

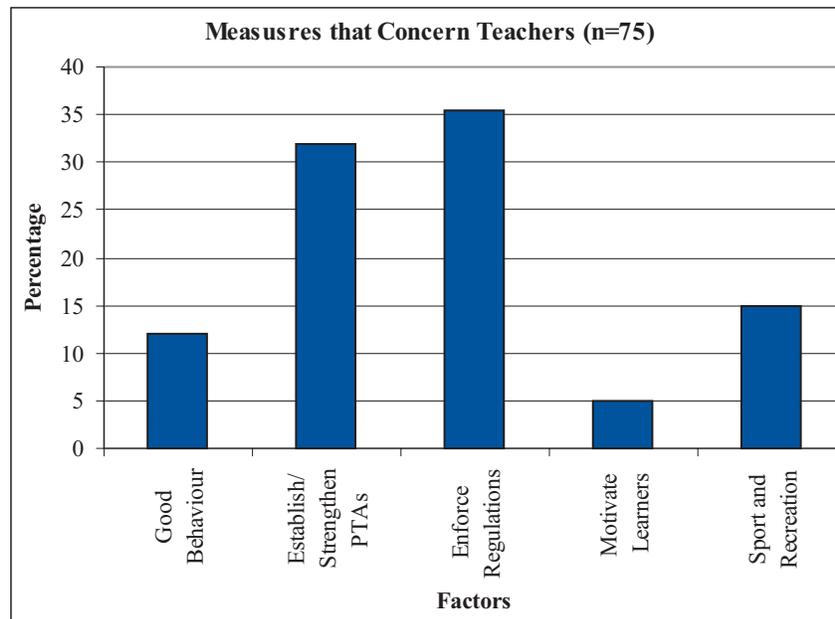
FIGURE 2
Respondents' Perceived Preventive Measures for School Violence

Figure 2a



involving parents in finding solution to school violence, empowering the students with skills to deal with anger or frustration, involving the community people in addressing school violence, providing counselling services for the students, and conducting workshops on drug abuse. Suggested measures that focus on the teachers include: establishing or strengthening Parents'-Teachers Associations, enforcing school regulations, encouraging participation in sports and recreation, and teachers' conducting themselves well (Figure 2b). Several measures suggested by the respondents concern the government or policy makers and the most prominent ones were punishing offenders, erecting security gates and hiring security guards, involving the police, reviewing the policy on student's discipline, promoting religious activities in schools, stop giving admission to over-age children, and providing enough furniture for students' use (Figure 2c).

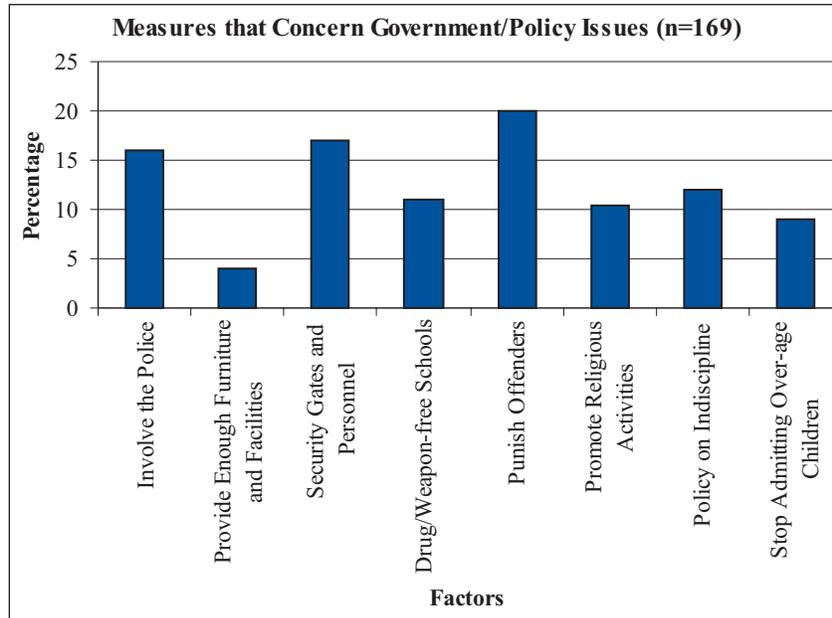
Figure 2b



DISCUSSION

In this study, as shown in Table 1, physical fighting is more likely to happen between two or more male students than between a male and a female or a female and another female student. The same pattern was observed for bullying. However, the result shows that it was not uncommon to see a

Figure 2c



male student bullying either a male or a female student. Studies (Pickett and others, 2005; Rudatsikira and others, 2007) have found that male students are more likely to engage in physical fight than females. Mahalik, Burns and Syzdek (2007) observed that traditional masculine gender socialisation and social norms encourage men to engage in behaviours that put their health at risk. In a study that examined the nature and prevalence of bullying/victimisation by peers and teachers (Delfabbro and others, 2006), it was consistently found that boys were more likely to be bullied than girls. Crick, Bigbee and Howes (1996) found that boys were also significantly more likely to be perpetrators of bullying, as well as engage in a wider range of bullying behaviour, extending from direct physical aggression, to name-calling and threats. Furthermore, by using hierarchical linear modelling, at the school level, Kaplan, Gheen and Midgley (2002) observed that being male and having lower achievement was related to reports of disruptive behaviour.

Research has shown that both physical fighting and bullying have several negative consequences. For example, in the study by Rudatsikira and others (2007), it was shown that male students—who were fond of engaging in physical fighting—were associated with cigarette smoking, alcohol

and illicit drug use. Delfabbro and others (2006) also posited that irrespective of the type of bullying involved, bullying has many undesirable consequences for individuals. For example, children who are bullied tend to have poorer esteem (Boulton and Smith, 1994), tend to be more depressed or anxious and to score higher on measures of suicide ideation (O'Sullivan and Fitzgerald, 1998).

As shown in Table 1, about one-third of the male respondents and one-fifth of the females claimed that in few occasions, students could be found using dangerous weapons in the school and serious physical assault also seldom happened. Swearing or cursing was said to be common among both the male and female students. However, the use of a gun within the school premises and the occurrence of rape were said to be very rare. The implication of these findings is that whether rarely or seldom, the fact that these violent behaviours happen at all in the schools serves as a predictor or determinant of the likelihood that a crisis might happen at any time in the affected schools. This might explain the reasons for what the *City Press* (August 30, 2009) described as 'litany of horror'. Following the murder in cold blood of a female principal of a school in Western Cape, South Africa, in August 2009, the newspaper wrote that the murder of the principal highlighted the violence that has become endemic in South African schools. However, the passage below which was taken from the same newspaper under the title 'Litany of Horror' shows that it is an understatement to refer to the situation as being endemic; it is actually an epidemic state. This is because as people say, one life lost is one life too many, not to talk of scores of valuable lives.

The principal's murder comes almost a year after a learner in a high school went on a rampage with a sword and killed a fellow student by slashing his throat. In the month prior to this, there were five reported incidents of violence in schools. Since then, at least five students have died on school grounds due to students' violent behaviour. No fewer than 15 stabbings with knives or scissors occurred in schools within the past year, resulting in three murder cases, four attempted murder cases, three cases of assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm. Six incidents on the list of the reported cases involved guns.

Vally and others (2002) noted that as far back as 1999, while the world was riveted by the media coverage of the horrific massacre of 13 high school students in the USA in the same year, the litany of violent acts in South African schools during that year alone far surpassed in number the tragedy in Colorado.

The results showed that only a few of the teachers had ever been physically attacked, sexually assaulted or threatened with a dangerous weapon by students in the past. However, about one-third of the male respondents and one-sixth of the females said they had been bullied, harassed or cursed by male students at least once within the past one year. Furthermore, a good proportion of the respondents, both male and female, said there were occasions when they had to beat some students because of misconduct and that at one time or the other, they had experienced feelings of depression as a result of students' misconduct. In a study on primary school teachers, Kokkinos (2007) showed that both personality and work-related stressors were associated with burnout dimensions.

In a study on the mental health challenges of educators concerning the experience of violence in secondary schools in an informal settlement in South Africa, Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2006) found that educators experienced disrespect through learners being physically aggressive to each other, and learners not treating educators with respect. They found that because the teachers felt disrespected, some of them lost their temper and beat the learners or made degrading remarks about their physical appearance.

Only a few of the respondents said they had resulted to smoking or drinking due to the negative impact of the students' serious misconduct. However, with regard to the question on whether or not the respondents had at any time felt like quitting the school due to the students' observed misconduct, many of them (31.1% of the males and 18.7% of the females) said they had experienced this type of feeling more than once within the past one year. Galand and others (2007), in a study on school violence and professional disengagement, concluded that negative emotional impact of some forms of school violence could be an important factor in a teacher's intention to leave. They also found that apart from age, which is weakly linked to professional disengagement, other demographic variables like gender and teaching experience were not associated. However, the study found that school support was important for both teachers' emotional well-being and professional disengagement.

As mentioned in the study background, several causes and risk factors are associated with interpersonal violence among students and these include access to weapon, cyber and television abuse, influence of the school environment, community environment and family environment (Talking Points, 2007). In line with this view, in this study, the respondents'

perceived causes of school violence were categorised into three areas: students, family background, and the school respectively. The factors linked to the students directly included drug abuse, love affairs, arrogance, peer influence, bullying/cursing, seeking recognition and theft. Those linked to the students' family background included family disintegration, lack of parental guidance, poverty and poor cultural background. Lack of discipline, overcrowding, activities of over-aged students and the issue of teachers not attending classes regularly were the factors associated with schools.

As shown above, theoretically, the ecological model (Dahlberg and Krug, 2002) is applicable to this study. According to this model, risk factors for violence are conditions that increase the possibility of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence. Dahlberg and Krug (2002) explain that no single factor explains why a person or group is at high risk or low risk of violence; rather violence is an outcome of a complex interaction among many factors. The authors have captured the relationship in a model that classifies risk factors for violence by four levels:

- individual (biological and personal history factors that influence how individuals behave),
- relationship (with family members, friends, intimate partners, peers),
- community (neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces), and
- societal (broad factors that reduce inhibitions against violence).

Alcohol or substance abuse problems, association with friends who engage in violent or delinquent behaviour, poor parental practices, low socioeconomic status of households, poverty, weak policies in schools, proximity to drug trade, sociocultural norms that support violence, availability of means (such as firearms), and ownership of guns were all part of the risk factors identified in the ecological model (Dahlberg and Krug, 2002).

In a Namibian study (Rudatsikira and others, 2007), the major risk factors identified were male gender, smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs, bullying, victimisation and lack of parental supervision. The multivariate analysis carried out in the study showed that males were more likely to have been in a physical fight than females [OR = 1.7, 95% CI (1.44, 2.05)]; smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs and bullying victimisation were positively associated with fighting [OR= 1.91, 95% CI (1.49, 2.45); OR = 1.48, 95% CI (1.21, 1.81); OR = 1.55, 95% CI (1.22, 1.81) ; and OR = 3.12, 95% CI (2.62, 3.72), respectively]. According to Vally (1998), the high

level of violence in South African schools reflects a complicated combination of past history and recent stresses—on individuals and community levels—in a society marked by deep inequities and massive uncertainty and change within school operations. Vally (1998) further observed that despite the end of the apartheid, race and ethnic tensions remain at the centre of much of the violence in the country.

In December 2009, a social commentator observed during a television programme that in South Africa, school children are often cautioned either by their parents or significant others to behave in a conformist pattern, but only for those children to witness the bizarre or aggressive behaviour (such as street fighting and substance abuse) being demonstrated openly on the street by the same people that are supposed to mentor/parent them. This makes it difficult for school children to perceive violence as something strange or unacceptable by the society. Recently, the principal of a private secondary school in Nigeria commented that the failure of parents to instruct their wards on the ways of African culture has been identified as the major cause of moral decadence amongst school children (Nzeakor, 2009).

In this study, by categorising the preventive measures into three, the researchers concur with the view that school violence is a complex problem arising from a web of influences, such as family dynamics, school climate, community and wider culture. According to the US Surgeon General (2007), the key to preventing a great deal of violence in schools is understanding where and when it occurs, determining what causes it, and scientifically documenting which strategies for prevention and intervention are truly effective. In an undated document, the Safe Schools and Communities Coalition, a non-governmental organisation, listed the characteristics of effective school-based violence prevention programmes as follows. This can serve as a guide for the government in addressing the problem in South Africa:

- A strong commitment to reaching all students and staff with the message that violence, harassment and intolerance are unacceptable in the school environment.
- Involving all students, staff, parents, and interested community members in learning about violence and how to prevent it.
- Eliminating barriers to communication among groups of students.
- Involving students in violence prevention initiatives as critical and valued partners.

- Collaborating closely and effectively with community, media, and policing agencies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The result of this study shows that there are several determinants and risk factors which often lead to students' violent behaviour in schools in Vhembe district and that the teachers recognise the violent atmosphere in their schools. As shown by the results, the causes of violent behaviour in the schools included in the study are multi-faceted and, therefore, the strategies to address the problem must also operate at a variety of levels. Plans should be developed in collaboration with students, teachers, administrators, parents, health professionals, law enforcements officers, business and community leaders, and other key community groups. Since the root causes of violence are complex, strategies to address this must be multi-faceted and comprehensive. Prevention strategies should incorporate knowledge from a variety of disciplines, such as education, social science, public health and administration.

It is being recommended that some of the best practices in developed countries, such as the USA can be adopted. These include the Students against Violence Everywhere programme (SAVE) , Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation programme, Youth Art programme, Peer and Adult Mentoring programme, Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, the use of Open Circle curriculum, the Peacemakers programme, and the Positive Adolescent Choices programme.

Specifically, judging from the result of this study, school violence in the study area is both a social problem and a public health issue. Therefore, as a matter of priority, resources should be mobilised to address all the issues identified as the precursors of violence by the teachers, such as drug abuse, thuggery, love affairs, overcrowding, lack of counselling services, poverty, bad upbringing, issues of some teachers not attending classes regularly, bullying, admission of over-aged children, policies that promote indiscipline in schools, lack of security facilities, and access to dangerous weapons/drugs. Failure to act decisively on this matter at this point in time might be interpreted as a systemic failure due to what Mogano (1993) referred as 'organic crisis', which refers to a situation where the dominant hegemony is disintegrating and the masses tied to the dominant and traditional ideologies have broken down. Simply put, 'organic crisis' is basically a crisis of authority (Mogano, 1993). A situation whereby students

indulge in alcohol and drug abuse freely in schools, where students carry knives or other dangerous weapons to school, where students fight to death over a girl or boy friend, where students fight over common facilities such as chairs and desks, where married men and women are found in the same class with children, does not augur well for a society; and something urgent and drastic needs to be done. In one of the schools where data was collected, one teacher told the investigators that in their school, there are students who are married couples, more than one-third of the students are parents, and that each year, at least 10 students get pregnant. This teacher lamented that those 'parent students' have no respect for them and the school authority at all because they see themselves first as parents and as individuals with advanced age who cannot be 'controlled by these young teachers'. This is a serious aberration and the issue should be addressed quickly and decisively. Secondary schools in all societies are meant for children and not 'parents or big adults'.

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