

Voices of Teachers on School Violence and Gender in South African Urban Public Schools

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Abstract: This article discusses the findings of a study conducted in Gauteng, South Africa. The main aim of the study was to examine how principals and educators experience and address violence in schools. This included investigating the gendered nature of school violence. The study used a qualitative research method, which drew upon individual and focus group interviews to collect data from the School Management Teams (SMTs), educators and the School Governing Bodies (SGBs parent component). Using a post-structuralist feminist view to understand the gendered nature of violence in the schools, the research findings show that school violence is a male and female phenomenon, although boys (young males) were seen as the main protagonists of school violence. Findings also revealed that, although female educators are sometimes victims of school violence, they use violence reduction strategies in their professional capacity as educators that any other professional could apply regardless of their gender. The strategies for eliminating violence in schools should not be gendered but should rather be all-encompassing and should take all factors into account that may play a role in causing violence.

Keywords: Social identities, gender violence, sexual harassment, essentialism, educators.

INTRODUCTION

Violence and crime are predominant social disorders in a significant number of schools in South Africa (Burton & Leoschut, 2012; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013 ; Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011; Ward, Artz, Berg, Boonzaier, Crawford-Browne, Dawes & van der Spuy, 2012). These disorders have presumably had debilitating effects on learning and teaching, posing a major management problem for school principals and their management teams. Some form of violence is likely to have taken place within the confines of the school environment since the inception of formal schools in South Africa. However, Burton and Leoschut (2012) point out that it is only in the last decade that school violence has become a national concern in South Africa.

Violence affects both male and female learners and educators. On the one hand, female learners experience acts of sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape at far higher levels than their male counterparts. On the other hand, males are usually found to experience higher levels of physical assaults (Burton & Leoschut, 2012). Generally, gender-based violence is not considered differently from other forms of school violence (Akiba, 2010). What predicts fear of school violence among US adolescents. *Teachers College Record*, 112(1), 68-102.). This becomes problematic in rural areas because some female

learners who become victims of gendered violence end up having to leave school which is not only negative for them, but for society as a whole. It is therefore important to look at violence from a gendered perspective in order to come up with appropriate strategies to combat it.

Research and other efforts to reduce violence have focused on the experiences of learners and male educators and not female educators whose work conditions are also affected by school violence (Burton & Leoschut, 2012; Leach, 2015; Ward, Artz, Berg, Boonzaier, Crawford-Browne, Dawes & van der Spuy, 2012). This article is based on the findings of a study conducted in Gauteng, South Africa, which examined principals' and educators' experiences of violence in schools, its causes, its impact on teaching and learning and how they mitigate it. Thus, this article uses the post-structuralist theoretical lens to explain the gendered perspectives of educators and school managers (principals) of secondary schools in Gauteng, South Africa.

VIOLENCE AND GENDER IN SCHOOLS

Gender violence in schools can be explicit or implicit. Explicit gender violence includes sexual harassment, intimidation, abuse, assault and rape; and implicit gender violence includes corporal punishment, bullying, verbal and psychological abuse, and teacher's unofficial use of students for free labour and other forms of aggressive or unauthorised behaviour that is violent (Akiba, 2010; Kaeflein, 2013; Netshitangani, 2017).

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Locally and internationally, researchers have focussed on gender violence in schools (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013; Mirembe & Davies, 2001; Leach, 2015; Mitchell & Mothobi-Tapela; 2004; Burton & Leoschut, 2012; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013; Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011). Mncube and Harber (2012) conducted a study in South African secondary schools to find out how violence manifests in these schools. The study revealed the presence of verbal arguments and fights between male and female learners in South African secondary schools. The study also reveals that male learners in most cases were found to be the ones that start physical fights. Schools however have the duty to teach the male learners to stop being violent to their female counterparts. Researchers (McCormack and Anderson, 2010; McCormack, 2011; Anderson & McCormack, 2018) identify ways that schools actively perpetuate forms of masculine identity that lends itself to violent interpretation and behaviour. Though these researchers (McCormack and Anderson, 2010; McCormack, 2011; Anderson & McCormack, 2018) were writing about the British context, the aspects they identify are common features of schooling internationally. They argue that the way that schools are organised, their authority patterns and forms of discipline reinforce key aspects of hegemonic masculinity which is why men have traditionally dominated school management. Second, the curriculum is seen as “academic masculinist” in that knowledge is presented as abstract, neutral and value free. Jackson (2015) also argue that “Knowledge control is in the hands of men”. While alternative forms of knowing can be found, the above form tends to be taken more seriously.

A recent study investigating the global prevalence of intimate partner violence against women found that in 2010, 30% women aged 15 and over had experienced, during their lifetime, physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence (Duncan, 2012; Devries, Mak, Garcia-Moreno, Petzold, Child, Falder & Pallitto, 2013). Data used for this study was from 141 studies in 81 countries. Half the number of girls had been touched inappropriately against their will at some time in their lives where the offenders were learners and educators, coaches, bus drivers, administrators and others affiliated with the school (Knoll, 2010). Likewise, Colton, Roberts and Vanstone (2010) conducted a case study of Sexual abuse by men who work with children. Indeed, the child sexual abuse was found to be a serious challenge.

Interestingly, research confirms that boys too are victims of sexual abuse in schools. Like girls, boys are

being sexually abused by educators and many other adults who work closely with the. Moreover, boys sexual abuse is also prevalent in sports (Parent and Bannon, 2012). Sexual abuse perpetrated on boys is a real issue in societies, underreported, and as such there are few studies on the prevalence and characteristics of sexual abuse of boys (Parent and Bannon, 2012).

School violence is also directed at gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and transgender pupils, particularly since the existence of people outside the heterosexual “norm” is denied or criminalised in many countries. Brown (2012) shows that rape on gay and lesbians is seen as ‘corrective rape’ which will cure them from lesbianism and gay behaviour. Therefore, gay lesbian learners regularly experienced physical or verbal abuse or harassment from peers, educators and, in some instances, even from school managers.

Violence is also perpetrated against young and old female educators by male educators, and also by (older) male learners (Netshitangani, 2017). Dunne, Leach *et al.* (2003) in their study report on the retention of female educators in rural areas of Ghana by Casely-Hayford (2009) beyond isolated cases. The study also reveals that boys often refuse to be punished by female educators. Their analysis suggests that the boys’ performances of masculinity attempt to subordinate female educators according to the gender order in school and society. Thus, these boys challenge the female educators’ authority and position in the school hierarchy. In some cases the female educators use their male colleagues to administer corporal punishment on their behalf to reinforce this gender hierarchy.

Another emerging trend regarding gender violence is the older women’s practice of forcing boys or young men into sex. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2002) mentioned such tendencies in one of its reports. The concern here is that, if such acts are happening in the wider society, are they not also happening in schools? This concern underscores the importance of this research which seeks to shed light on this matter in the Gauteng school context.

POST-STRUCTURALIST FEMINISM

Post-structuralism is critical of the universalising theories of modernism such as Marxist metanarratives (Winter & Wigglesworth, 1993). Post-structuralism stresses the complexity and heterogeneity of social



identities and rejects essentialist notions of identity as being biologically predetermined. Moreover, Nicholson (1990) points out that post-structuralism and postmodernism “reject any celebration of difference for its own sake”.

Hence post-structural feminism came up with new ways of seeing and knowing. It grew out of post-structuralism, which challenged structural conception of the system, driving the machine of the society. Post-structuralism challenged structuralism’s binary oppositions like men and women, heterosexual and homosexual, normal and deviant, subjects and objects and so forth (Winter & Wigglesworth, 1993). For example, feminist post-structuralism particularly challenges the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity by showing that using it placed masculinity first, while making femininity second, and also “other” thus marginalising femininity (Winter & Wigglesworth, 1993).

Broadly speaking, post-structuralism, drawing on the work of French philosopher Michael Foucault, argues against building universalising theories on sound assumptions of “natural sexuality or eternal femininity” (Davies, in Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Jones 1993; Weiner, 1994; Walton, in Winter & Wigglesworth, 1993). In addition, some post-structuralists advocate that cultures and individuals do not have “essential unity”, meaning that cultures and individual identity are not necessarily unified (Eagleton, 1983).

Another dimension brought by post-structural feminism is the recognition of the importance of “agency” and “structures” in producing social practices. This dimension acknowledges that during socialisation people are not merely passively socialised into their personal worlds by others. Rather, each person is an active participant in taking up and embodying discourses through which he or she is shaped (Davies in Weiner, 1994). Moreover, feminist post-structuralism argues that “what it means to be a ‘woman’ and /or be acceptably ‘feminine’ shifts and changes as a consequence of discursive shifts and changes in culture and history” (Davies in Weiner, 1994).

Thus, the post-structuralist debate opens up new possibilities for understanding female socialisation in a way which goes beyond seeing girls and women primarily as “disadvantaged” and socialised within patriarchal structures (Jones, 1993).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a pilot study conducted in Gauteng, South Africa. The broader intentions and purposes of the study were to examine principals’ and educators’ experiences of violence in schools, its causes, its impact on teaching and learning and how they address it. Qualitative research methodology was used to conduct the study. The following questions were regarded as being critical to the aims of the study: What is the nature of violence in schools? What are the causes for escalating school-based violence? To what extent is management of curriculum delivery compromised due to the violence occurring in schools? Are there changes in the teaching and learning context, as a result of violence in schools? How do principals apply discipline to both learners and educators, given the increasing incidents of school violence? Does school-based violence affect different genders differently?

Data collection of the study involved integrating appropriate secondary and primary research data. This includes desk review of relevant documents and materials, reports, evaluations, previous studies, newspapers and related policies. It also includes in-depth interviews with principals, and focus-group discussions with SMTs, educators, SGBs, and doing participant observations.

Four schools in Gauteng province made up the sample of this research project. The choice of and rationale for including the sampled four schools in the study reflect the nature, rather than the type, of the investigation and conforms to pilot study characteristics which are essentially exploratory (Strydom, 2011). Since the study was part of a comprehensive countrywide initiative that was to follow, the latter “type” of study conforms to an intrinsic case study approach according to which the four schools were each viewed in terms of their unique and idiosyncratic peculiarities. Therefore, it would be tantamount to the means defeating the end if the results are interpreted as an understanding of the collective impact of the phenomenon (Fouche, Schurink & De Vos, 2011).

School principals (and their deputies where the principals were unavailable), school management teams (SMTs) and educators were identified as the most probable respondents in presenting both management and curriculum-centred perspectives in the context of violence occurring on school premises. Typical case sampling was used to select the sites for



the research. Thus, a deliberate effort was made to identify those schools that experienced some form of violence, both serious and less serious violence related incidents. This was achieved by reviewing newspaper articles and by asking officials in the provincial department to recommend schools.

For principals, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were employed in order to allow the interviewees to use their own ways of defining their worlds. These interviews also allowed principals to raise other issues important to them that may not be contained in the interview guide prepared by a researcher (Creswell, 2010; Patton, 2015; Silverman, 2010). Each principal was interviewed individually.

For educators and SMT members, focus groups were used because within focus groups the participants are encouraged to engage with each other. They engage by asking questions and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view. Focus groups were constructed such that the diversity of educators and school management teams in the schools were reflected. Between three and five SMT members, and between three and five educators from each of the four schools were interviewed in focus groups. One SGB member (parent component) of each school was also interviewed. Thus, four different instruments were used. Each instrument had similar questions but was customised to fit each category of interviewees.

Analysis of the data was done thematically and predetermined themes from literature were used. Emerging themes from the data were also analysed and interpreted. Similar responses were grouped together into categorical themes. This identification of themes provided depth to the insights about understanding the individual views of the interviewees. Similar codes were aggregated together to form a major idea from the data (Creswell, 2010).

This study involved research on human subjects, the collection of private or personal information, or the participation of individuals in individual interviews and focus group interviews. Therefore, the research was designed in such a way that it protected participants' privacy, dignity and integrity. To ensure this, the project proposal and instruments were submitted to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Ethics committee for approval. Further, in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and also to protect the learners who were involved in violent related incidents, the schools' real names were not used. Instead, the schools were

referred to as school 1, school 2, school 3 and school 4.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Is School Violence Gender-Based?

When answering the question: Is school violence a male problem or a female problem? The participants turned the discussion into male educators versus female educators' debate. While the female educators indicated that violence was more associated with boys, the male educators had a contrary view that it had more to do with the girls. After a rigorous discussion of contrasting views, participants commonly agreed that although both sexes were involved in violence, boys tended to be more aggressive. So, boys are more associated with violent behaviour than females. Therefore, participants viewed school violence as both a male and female problem, although boys were seen as the main protagonists.

Participants also collectively agreed that most of the times, the boys fight over girls because the younger girls are more promiscuous, hence boys are the "exhibitors" of violence while the girls are the "causers" of violence. This implied that violence, according to the participants, fairly implicates both males and females as stated by the educators and SMT member. The following are participants' responses:

Boys fight over girls because other girls have multiple boyfriends. (Educator)

Boys are more physical in violence, and girls are mostly vocal, hence they are noisemakers during a fight. (SMT member)

Boys are the main worry when it comes to violence. (Educator)

Girls are less violent but nowadays they are becoming more aggressive and violent, teaming up against any individual, whether a teacher or a learner, who have a problem with one of them. (Educator)

Furthermore, when asked to comment on whether or not girls were involved as aggressors, the participants' indicated that:

Girls are involved, but to a lesser extent when compared to boys. (SMT member)



Girls usually quarrel about affairs with boys; they rarely become physical in their quarrels. (SMT member)

During the fight by boys girls make noise to encourage the boys that are fighting. (Educator)

The participant statements above show that girls are not always powerless or disadvantaged contrary to general perceptions. It is generally believed that girls respect elders and are less aggressive. But what these educators are actually saying is that girls too can react like boys and engage in violent behaviour. Thus, to rely on theories of socialisation alone to understand the gendered behaviour can be limiting. Therefore, according to post-structural feminism, both genders can be powerful and powerless, aggressive and peaceful at different times and in different contexts.

Female Educators and Violence in Schools

When asked if they felt safe on school premises, what emerged was that some female educators, particularly young educators, felt more unsafe on the school premises than their male counterparts. Some female educators also indicated that they depended on male educators for security on the school premises and had confidence that male educators would be able to assist them in such a situation. Also, when intimidated by learners, some women educators tend to ignore such learners, a reaction not consistent with individual classroom-based strategies. As a result, effective teaching does not take place in this kind of situation. Female educators had this to say in this respect:

For the first time I was a little bit scared, but normally most of the time I feel safe. (Female educator)

We feel safe most of the time; however if the big boys are fighting and there is no male teacher I feel insecure but if there is a male teacher I feel safe. (Female educator)

We ignore them, and focus on the learners who are cooperating. We sometimes send them out of the class because they are disturbing those who want to learn. (Female educator)

Further, in response to the question: How do women educators handle violence in the schools? It

was evident that apart from just depending on male educators for security, they also depend on them for assistance in handling incidents of violence in the school. Some female participants indicated their views as follows:

They (boys) get attentive even when we hit them for bad behaviour, I will never beat them badly but I do beat them, I did it and they still like me. I hit about four of them in my two years here and they are proud of this. But some of my colleagues don't, rather they dismiss them from their classes or ignore them totally and report them after the lessons for disciplinary hearing and action. (Female Educator)

What this educator is saying here is that she actually disciplines learners who exhibit violent behaviour. At issue here, and the focus of this article is that there are female educators who handle violent offenders themselves instead of relying on male educators. This is in agreement with what post-structuralism advocates that femininity is not synonymous. Therefore other females will prefer to enlist help from male teachers while others prefer to discipline the boys themselves. However, there are females who prefer to seek for assistance from male educators as these two indicated:

We call male educators to assist with big boys. (Female educator)

When a violent incident is too much aggressive, then we need the assistance of the male educators and the big boys to control them (Female educator)

These female educators' responses suggest that some female educators also depend on male educators for assistance to discipline learners and for security in school premises. They have confidence that the male educators will always be available to assist them. Given the stereotypes and the socialisation character of gender, it is not surprising that some of these female educators rely on their male counterparts for help, as there are those women who still believe that men are physically stronger than women. Moreover, some learners too are part of the same socialisation and believe that male educators are much stronger than women. However, as post structuralism advocates, the meaning of being female or male changes over times, therefore histories and this kind of



stereotyping are starting to change as many violent incidents are directed to male educators by male learners.

From the above comments, it is evident that the way female educators handle violence incidents vary. Some prefer to discipline the learners themselves, while others indicated that when a violent incident is too antagonistic, they call for the assistance of the male educators to deal with such occurrences. It is critical to note that, while corporal punishment is unlawful in South Africa, educators proudly and openly express how they use it to curb violence. Thus, the manner in which they deal with violence here is highly problematic and needs to be critiqued because they are attempting to solve violence with violence, which is counterproductive.

While female educators may generally be viewed as weak and scared to discipline boys who are violent, some deal with them instead of relying on male colleagues for help. This challenges the notion of females as being mere victims and merely disadvantaged. Indeed, social identities are complex and heterogeneous (Winter & Wigglesworth, 1993).

Further, regarding how female educators handle violent incidences, some participants indicated that these educators applied procedures outlined in the school's policy. Thereafter, the case(s) would first be recorded, followed by the invitation of parents to be informed of the matter and witness the disciplinary process. Consequently, the school determines the disciplinary measures it may apply, for example suspension. Moreover, it was also said that in handling violence, women also use other methods like a communication book. In this book, they record cases which require parents visit the school to discuss a child's behaviour before he/she is allowed to go back to class after committing a violent act. The following are participants' responses in this regard:

We normally follow the procedures. We first record the incident, and then call the parents of the violent child to tell them about the offence of the learner. (Female educator)

They use the communication book (a book in which all learners' incidents of violence and any unacceptable behavior is recorded). The learner is not allowed back into the class before the parent comes to

school to discuss his/her child's behaviour. (Principal)

What is apparent in these participants' responses is that women would use strategies that are relevant and could be applied by any other professional, male or female. Thus, to just look at the way women behave only through a gendered perspective could be limiting. After all, what it means to be a "woman" shifts and changes as a consequence of discursive shifts and changes in culture and history (Davies in Weiner, 1994).

In response to the question: Are women educators involved in school violence? The emergent views were that women educators are generally not involved in school violence as expressed by one SMT member:

They (female educators) are largely the recipients of emotional violence, such as being threatened and verbally abused by bully boys in front of other learners. (SMT member)

One of the learners who is a "serial offender" in this school said to a female white educator that he was going to show her what a black man does to a white woman. He was saying this while holding his private parts. (SMT member)

Such insinuation from a learner is gendered, emotionally violent and racist. Therefore, most women educators are physically and emotionally threatened by unruly and bully boys. This kind of behaviour is surprising because of the general belief that children are socialised to respect the authorities is hereby falsified. The learner was supposed to respect the female educator who is a mother figure. Instead the learner sees the female teacher as a sex object who should be disciplined by sexual violence. The point here is that boys and girls may behave differently in different contexts and there could be interplay of many factors and not just gender alone.

Sexual Harassment

Even though the participants expressed that there were no extreme forms of sexual harassment experienced in their schools, they also expressed that boys often indulged in the practice of touching girls on their backsides and breasts. The boys do this whether the girls approve of it or not, which is a behaviour that



constitutes sexual harassment. The following are participants' responses on this issue:

Boys like touching the girls on the buttocks whether the girls agree or not. (Educator)

Ja (yes), the only thing they do often is to pat the girls on the buttocks and breasts and it annoys the girls. (Educator)

Boys are naughty sometimes...a girl was crying because one boy touched her bums, just that.... (SMT member)

Participants further indicated that even if there was no explicit sexual violence reported learners used cell phones to engage in sexual cyber harassment. This is a sexual violent behaviour that is affecting many learners negatively. Moreover, the participants indicated that learners sent pornographic pictures to educators too. This means that in a school setting educators and learners experience cyber bullying, which also happens between learners and learners, and between learners and educators. One participant responded that:

Nowadays harassment does occur among learners through the cell phone where a learner will send or show pornographic pictures to fellow learners on the phone. We have heard of an educator who was sending pornographic pictures to a learner and that is too bad! (SGB member)

Educators are expected to act "in loco parentis" to children, but according to the data in this study educators are abusing learners instead of protecting them. They do this by sending pornographic pictures to the learners. Again, this kind of behaviour by educators confirms that even though individuals are socialised into behaving in a certain way, they are active participants in their socialization who have the agency to accept or refute some aspects of their socialisation, rejecting essentialist notions of identity (Eagleton, 1983).

Some participants indicated that there were no such occurrences. The incidents of sexual harassment were said to have occurred in the previous years. Participants argued that due to the level of discipline in the school, boys did not play roughly with the girls during school hours. However, they did not rule out the fact that it could be happening outside the school premises as some of the girls seemed to like being

rough too. The assertion was premised on the notion that the good relationship between learners and educators would have encouraged victims of violence to report such cases if it occurred. Some participants indicated that:

No, there is no sexual harassment in this school. Harassment used to take place years ago but now it does not happen because children are disciplined and they report to us any bad behaviour that happens. (Principal)

Our learners are disciplined and boys are not rough when playing with girls in the school yard, maybe outside the school because other girls enjoy it. (SMT member)

However, other participants were of the opinion that by virtue of their feminine nature, girls were generally not "physical" in their outlook. Instead the participants said that girls needed to be protected, rather than abused. This means that because of socialisation, the educators see girls as needing protection. Recently, literature shows that boys are also becoming victims of sexual violence by both females and males (WHO Report, 2002). Thus, boys too need protection. Literature indicates that women are also reported to be forcing males to have sexual relations with them. These types of actions further agree with the notion of multiple identities of people advocated by post-structuralists. The point here is that even though women and men are products of socialisation, females who are generally considered to be weaker are now harassing males. This confirms an assertion by post-structuralist feminism which argues that in the production of social practices, people are not only socialised into their personal worlds and not only passively shaped by others. Rather, each person becomes active in taking up discourses through which he or she is shaped (Davies in Weiner, 1994). Thus in this study, both genders may at one point need protection and at another point not. As said by one of the SMT members:

Girls are girls; they do not start fights unless they are provoked. They need to be protected from harassment by the males. (SMT member)

It is not surprising that these educators say that girls need to be protected. Generally, both males and



females are socialised into believing that women are a weaker gender and they need to be protected by men who are stronger and more able. The risk is to regard this as “natural” to women, and to essentialise women’s reaction to violence. At issue, and to be remembered, is that women have been socialised into nurturing roles.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The data in the study revealed that indeed people have multiple identities and interpreting and analysing phenomena using an essentialist view could be limiting.

Boys and girls at different times and in different context behaved differently. Although the participants stressed that school violence was more of a male issue, it also emerged that girls are also involved as aggressors and may be fighting for similar or different reasons. It also emerged that some girls too fight boys and educators, confirming the post-structuralist view that women and men are both powerful and powerless in different contexts.

It also became evident that female educators are not homogeneous. While on the one hand, they depend on male educators for protection when there is violence. On the other hand, female educators also showed bravery by dealing with the violent learners themselves. While their actions can be interpreted through a lens of gender, they also behave like any other teacher who is expected to be professional irrespective of whether they are female or male.

Thus, the violence reduction strategies should take into account that violence is both a male and female problem, affecting both and committed by both. A gendered lens, while critical, might in itself be too narrow to understand violence in schools.

The strategies for eliminating violence in schools should not be gendered but should rather be all-encompassing, and consider all factors that may have a share in causing violence. The social nature of masculinity and femininity, and alternatives to aggressive and violent masculinity and femininity, needs to be examined and discussed in schools and in teacher education.

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