



Teachers' Views About the Intricacies of Learner-On-Teacher Violence and the Implications for School Leadership

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Abstract

Despite a global concern and interest in researching school violence, little is known about the nature of violence perpetrated by learners against the teachers. The in loco-parentis status of teachers position them in a situation where they are expected to address various challenges that learners encounter. These challenges include, inter alia, school violence. However, teachers are sometimes victims of violence that they experience from their own learners. Thus, school violence is a complicated phenomenon. This paper is intended to add to the debates about school violence with a focus on physical violence and threats of violence perpetrated by learners against teachers and the leadership implications thereof. The paper uses eco-systemic theory to interpret and explain the said violence. I used semi-structured interviews to generate data from 12 teachers and 2 principals. The participants were purposely selected from two South African high schools. The findings revealed that learner-on-teacher violence in general and physical as well as threats of violence in particular are complicated in that they occur within the parameters of interconnected systems and subsystems. The paper argue that it is imperative for principals and other teachers to provide a vision and direction for non-violent relationships between learners and teachers.

Keywords: *Influence; Leadership; School Violence; Victim*

Introduction

School violence is currently on the global agenda (Khoury-Kassabri, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2009). Studies conducted in developed countries, for example, paint a worrying picture of ramifications of violence instigated by learners against teachers (Ozmdemir, 2012; Ewen, 2007; West, 2007). A study conducted by West (2007) in Australia found that school violence has far-reaching consequences on teachers. These include, but are not limited to, a desire to leave the teaching profession, loss of confidence, anger, fear and concern at not being supported by colleagues.

Studies about violence have consistently found that South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world and this violence is prevalent in schools (Harber, 2004; Shields, Nadasen & Hanneke, 2015). Thus, teachers also experience violence perpetrated by learners. Principals and teachers alike are subjected to various forms of violence such as arrogant refusal to follow instructions, undermining authority, intimidation of sexual orientation, obscene language, personal insults, racist remarks, rude or obscene gestures (Singh, 2006). Research has found that teachers' characteristics such as gender and race seem to contribute to the violence that they experience (McMahon, Martinez, Reddy, Espelage & Anderman, 2017).

It is also worth noting that teachers are not always passive victims of violence instigated against them by learners. The way in which school management and teachers address issues of discipline in a school may create opportunities for internal conflict and school violence (van der Merwe, 2016). Despite more than twenty years after the abolition of corporal punishment, some teachers in South Africa continue to use it as a means of disciplining learners (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016). Yet research has shown that corporal punishment is a form of violence and using it conveys to learners a message that using violence to resolve misunderstanding is acceptable. In turn, the learners are likely to become violent (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016; Mncube & Harber, 2013).

The common law assigns South African teachers in loco parentis role in relation to their learners (Oosthuizen, 1992). Based on their in loco parentis status, teachers are expected, inter alia, to protect learners from harm (Prinsloo, 2005) in general and school violence in particular. In loco parentis also implies that teachers should play a pastoral role and discipline learners whenever necessary (De Waal, Theron & Robinson, 2001). Yet learners sometimes instigate violence against the teachers.

Closely related to teachers' role of in loco parentis is the leadership and management requirement, which all South African teachers are expected to exercise regardless of their occupational positions (South African Department of Education, 2000). According to Mokhele (2016) teachers as leaders in formal and informal positions influence the failure or success of a school. It may be argued that a successful school is the one that experiences low levels of violence.

In a systematic review of interventions regarding school violence Lester, Lawrence and Ward (2017) found that little is known about the nature of learner-on-teacher violence and the prevention mechanism thereof. School violence negatively affects education (Khoury-Kassabri, Astor & Benbenishty, 2009). However, the lion's share of research has concentrated on violence among learners. The South African Department of Education at macro level has invested plenty of resources in an effort to address school violence. However, violence continues to cripple the functioning of many schools in South Africa (van der Merwe, 2016). Thus, in this paper, I highlight the intricacies or complexities of learner-on-teacher violence. I hope to add knowledge in this largely neglected yet important area. I take the debates further by dwelling on leadership implications emanating from teachers' views of violence they suffer from their learners. The paper mainly focuses on two forms of violence namely: physical and threats of violence. In view of the increasing media reports, national and international debates about school violence, this knowledge is essential. With increased understanding of school violence in general and learner-on-teacher violence in particular, policymakers and practitioners (school managers and teachers) might devise appropriate proactive and reactive measures of curbing school violence. The paper is guided by the following key questions:

- What are teacher's views regarding learner-on-teacher violence?
- What leadership implications can be drawn from teachers' views of learner-on-teacher violence?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In seeking to understand and explain the intricacies of learner-on-teacher violence, I used a two-pronged framework consisting of the concept leadership and eco-systemic theory. The former was useful in addressing the second research question that deals with the implications of school leadership while the latter provided an appropriate lens to explain the intricacies of school violence.

The term leadership has diverse definitions. Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010) define leadership as an intentional process of influence aimed at achieving organisational goals. They further argue that this process of influence can be exercised by anyone in the school regardless of their position. In this sense, various school leaders may influence the manner in which learner-on-teacher violence is tackled. Cognisant that schools as organisations have become complex in the 21st century, and therefore require multiple leaders to lead and manage (Spillane, 2005), the principal still plays a central role in the leadership and management of a school. The principal as the senior leader and manager of the school is expected to make a clear and easy path to be followed by his or her subordinates in pursuit of organisational goals (Gordon & Alston, 2009). In the context of this paper, the leadership of the principals is essential as it could provide a direction in addressing school violence. Leadership and management practices overlap (Morrison, 1998). The successful operation of a school depends on effective leadership and management (Bush, 2003). As a result, the two terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

Since learners perpetrate violence against teachers in a given school environment or context, Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic theory is deemed appropriate as part of the frame for this paper. Estevez, Jimenez and Mustin (2008) emphasise the influence of environment or social context on violent behaviour of people. I regarded school violence as emanating from the environment in that a person learns behaviour in response to certain environmental events. Bronfenbrenner's theory consists of five interrelated systems namely: micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Central to this theory is an individual who is involved in interrelated relationships' emanating from the systems (Estevez et al, 2008). However, not all five systems or stages were relevant to the current paper. Thus, I mainly used the first two systems.

The first system is microsystem. It is about learners' immediate environment whereby various roles, activities and interpersonal relationships occur. It involves such social contexts as peer group, family and school (Bronfenbrenner 1994). Any of the contexts is likely to influence violence perpetrated by learners against teachers. Peer pressure can promote violent behaviour of learners. Family also acts as a powerful social institution where learners can learn socially accepted or unaccepted behaviour including violent behaviour (South African Council of Educators, 2011). Schools that reward and model accepted social norms create a positive environment. However, in some schools, teachers directly model violent behaviour using corporal punishment. Thus, learners who are exposed to violence tend to use violent means to resolve conflicts (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016).

The second system is mesosystem. This system focuses on the connection between microsystems such as school and family (Santrock, 2008). By virtue of being a learner in a school, a learner links the two systems namely: a school and a family. Thus, the interaction between the school and the family constitute a mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This system is also likely to influence the violent behaviour or acts of learners against the teachers.

Methods

In this paper, I adopted a qualitative research approach to find out the views of teachers pertaining to the intricacies of learner-on-teacher violence. This allowed for the exploration of the

participants' understanding and sense making regarding the intricacies of learner-on-teacher violence (Morse & Richards, 2002).

Two high schools located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa were purposively selected as research sites. In line with ethical consideration of anonymity, I used fictitious names in reference to these schools. I nicknamed the first school Book High School (BHS) and the second one Case High School (CHS).

Since I was interested in understanding teachers' perspectives regarding intricacies of violence instigated by learners against teachers, I purposely selected the teachers as participants. Six teachers and a principal from each school were selected and interviewed. The selected teachers had more than five years teaching experience in the participant schools. Thus, I considered these participants as having rich knowledge about the intricacies of violence that teachers experience from their learners.

I held Individual and semi-structured interviews with the participants. Thereafter I transcribed the interviews. Having transcribed the interviews, I then analysed them through an inductive process of content analysis where patterns, themes and categories emerged (Patton, 2002).

In an effort to enhance trustworthiness, Merriam's (1998) advice regarding member checks was followed. This entailed going back to the participants to request them to check the interview transcriptions and confirm whether the transcripts captured what they said. In addition, this paper was subjected to peer debriefing (Merriam, 1998) where my peers acted as critical readers. My critical readers identified parts of the paper that required improvement, and I made corrections accordingly.

I observed all ethical issues. Permission was obtained from all gatekeepers. I obtained informed consent from the participants. In order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, I used fictitious names in reference to the participants and their schools.

Findings

For the purposes of protecting the participants' identity I refer to BHS teacher participants as BHST1, BHST2, BHST3, BHST4, BHST5 and BHST6. Their counterparts from CHS are called CHST1, CHST2, CHST3, CHST4, CHST5 and CHST6. I refer to the principal of BHS as BHSP and that of CHS as CHSP. In keeping with the focus of this paper, I present the findings that speak to the physical violence and threats of violence instigated by learners against the teachers. This section is then followed by a discussion and school leadership implications sections.

Physical Violence

The findings from interviews with the participants show that teachers viewed physical violence to be characterised by such deliberate acts as pushing, pulling and assault. In BHS, the participants referred to an incident where a learner physically attacked and killed a teacher in the classroom. The principal of BHS had this to say:

In this school, one learner stabbed a teacher to death during the lesson in Grade 8 class. The learner is still in prison. The victim was a new female teacher. It was a very sad incident to those who witnessed it. The teachers and learners were much traumatised. They had to undergo counselling.

BHST 1 provided details of the incident reported by BHSP:

One teacher in this school has passed on. She was invigilating and she spotted a learner who was cheating or copying and then she confronted him. After the confrontation, the teacher turned

around and proceeded with invigilation. The learner just stood up and stabbed her. She died in the classroom.

Referring to another incident of physical violence, BHST2 spoke about a teacher who was slapped by a learner and the support that other teachers provided to their colleague:

A learner slapped on the face one of the female teachers in this school. We offered support to that teacher. It was a Grade 9 learner and the teacher was new in the school. We called the learner to the staffroom and told him that we were not going to do anything on that particular day until he apologised. He apologised. Then from there we went to classes. The learner was suspended from the school on that day. Since we supported the teacher, she did not leave the school.

In the same school, one teacher spoke about a teacher being pushed by a learner as violence:

In this school, there is a teacher who was pushed by a learner in the class during the lesson. That was one of the closest incidents to assault which I saw since I came to this school (BHST3).

Another teacher from BHS reported a case where the teacher left the classroom due to violent behaviour of one of the learners:

It was a case where one of my colleagues was teaching and she had long braids. The learner stood up and pulled the teacher's braids. The learners did not want to write the notes. The teacher came back from class crying. It was physical violence (BHST4).

At CHS the participants had conflicting views regarding the prevalence or non-occurrence of physical violence instigated by learners against the teachers. While the principal was of the view that such violence did not happen in this particular school, other teacher participants reported otherwise. Talking about physical violence experienced by teachers the principal had this to say:

We haven't had any cases of physical violence where a child physically attacks a teacher. Physical violence by the learner against the teacher can lead to the learner's expulsion. The matter is handled by the School Governing Body (SGB). It is the SGB which recommends a transfer of a learner to another school (CHSP).

To the contrary, two CHS teachers spoke about two separate incidents where learners directed physical violence against the teachers.

Not long ago when I came to this school one teacher was walking to the staff room; a learner took a brick, threw it at the teacher and hit her. That teacher got injured. That learner was suspended from the school (CHST1).

A learner assaulted one of the deputy principals. The issue was reported to the disciplinary committee. That learner was suspended. We also have the School Governing Body which deals with serious disciplinary hearings (CHST2).

Another CHS teacher referred to a case where a learner threatened and physically violated a teacher in the classroom:

There was an incident last year where a teacher asked for something from a child. It was during examination time. This learner threatened to assault the teacher. However, the learner actually pushed the teacher (CHST 3)

Some forms of violence such as physical assault on a teacher caused a great impact on those who experienced or witnessed them even if they were not perpetrated often. The ultimate goal of education which is teaching and learning was also likely to have been negatively affected since violence against teachers may demotivate them (Wilson, Douglas & Lyon, 2011). It was likely that those in senior positions such as the principal might not paint a grave picture of their school since they feared that their leadership and management might be viewed as weak (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Physical violence instigated by the learners against the teachers appeared to have been more serious at BHS than CHS. Although it was a once off incident, the violent killing of a teacher by a learner at BHS illustrates that physical violence experienced by teachers may have serious repercussions.

Threats of Violence

The findings from the interviews with the participants indicated that teachers viewed as violence, threats which they experienced from some learners. Such threats were reportedly levelled by some learners against certain teachers in the classrooms and outside the classroom. BHST from BHS for instance reported:

He [a learner] informed the teacher that he had people outside the school that would catch this teacher if she could get him suspended again. The teacher reported this incident to the disciplinary committee and it was referred to SGB. That learner was expelled from the school because we found that he was a threat to the teachers. He was disturbing the effective teaching and learning in the class. Sometimes you have to take drastic decisions just to stabilise teaching and learning.

Sometimes the threats became so serious that the victim had to leave the school. Referring to an issue where some learners were suspected of writing insults on the door of one HOD at BHS, BHST5 had this to say:

The attitude that we observed which the parents and learners were taking was to attack and threaten the teacher to create a situation where a teacher should leave the school. The teacher concerned was very furious, angry and felt that she was not secured. She felt helpless. She felt that the school had to take action drastically. The teacher then left the school.

It was also reported in BHS that learners threatened teachers with the possibility of inviting non-members of the school community to harm the teachers. The following participants highlighted this issue:

I mean you hear every now and then a teacher saying that a particular learner said he has got people outside (BHST 6).

In CHS, various participants also reported threats of violence against the teachers. When provoked by the teachers, some learners were reported to retaliate by using threats of violence against the teachers with possible support from their parents. As CHSP put it:

We had a case where a teacher slapped a child and as the child runs out of the school premises to call the parents, the child threatened the teacher and said "I come back for you with my parents, watch it, you don't do that to me again. I am coming back for you." So you find that the learners will be violent if they are provoked by the educator.

For CHST4 threats of violence were common in CHS, but learners did not actually attack the teachers physically:

We also have cases where learners have threatened to catch teachers after school perhaps because the teachers disciplined these learners during the day or they made them kind of ...they humiliated them in class. So learners will make a threat to that particular teacher. However, we have not had a case where learners actually attack teachers physically.

One teacher indicated that a learner threatened him (teacher) with physical violence for no apparent reason known to the teacher. However, this teacher neither took action nor reported such incidents to any member of the school management team:

I was in the classroom and the learners were leaving the class. So on his way out of the class this boy passed closer to me and said "I will stab you." I don't remember saying or doing anything which might have annoyed him (CHST 5).

Another teacher who experienced threats of violence from a learner had this to say:

One boy threatened me. He said he was going to call his father to sort me out. He wanted me to let him have his own way of doing things in the class. He wanted to leave the classroom before finishing the class work because everyone was going out for break (CHST6)

The principal of CHS was also not immune from learners' threats of physical violence. As one teacher noted:

The learner turned around and he shoved the principal back and then said "you can't hit me. Just try to hit me and you will see what I will do." The SGB ordered a disciplinary hearing. Anyway, he was suspended for a week and he came back to the school the following week and he was basically being monitored after that (CHST 3).

The threats we reported above seem to have been as strong in impact as physical assault. Therefore, it can be concluded that in terms of threats, the two schools can be said to have been quite violent against teachers. Some learners at CHS threatened teachers by a possibility of inviting their parents to instigate violence against such teachers. Threats negatively influenced teaching and learning (Ncontsa & Shuma, 2013). In some instances, teachers had to abandon the teaching process because of threats. The violated teachers were also negatively affected as some of them felt helpless, angry and unsafe. It was also apparent that threats of violence instigated by learners against the teachers sometimes emanated from the teachers' attempts to adopt violent means in disciplining the learners.

Discussions

This paper sought to understand the intricacies of learner-on-teacher violence and school leadership implications thereof. The paper found that physical violence and threats of violence experienced by teachers in the two schools were compounded by intricacies that manifested themselves in two interconnected systems or levels namely: microsystem and mesosystem.

At the microsystem level, the teachers' views of their experiences of violence instigated against them by learners depicted a complicated picture of a school as a fragmented system where relationships between subsystems (learners and teachers) were sometimes defined by violence. Microsystem is regarded as an individual's immediate environment in which different activities, roles and interpersonal relationships transpire (Brenfenbrenner, 1994). Violence that resulted from confrontations between some learners and teachers in the two participant schools illustrated obscure communication patterns between

subsystems of one system. For example, a number of participants from the two schools noted that occasionally some learners threatened to assault or actually assaulted some teachers. Such learners in one way or the other undermined the teachers' authority and the right of the teachers to exercise their pastoral role of care by disciplining learners where and whenever necessary (De Waal, Theron & Robinson, 2001). It was further found that the relationship between learners and teachers were further complicated by the manner in which some teachers in certain instances attempted or actually used violence as a way of disciplining learners. Mncube and Harber (2013) argue that when the teachers become violent to learners, the learners may consider violence as normal and therefore reproduce it. In this way, CHS, through the acts of some teachers, as an immediate environment to learners contributed to learner-on-teacher violence that did not only violate the affected teachers, but also undermined the teaching and learning process.

The findings also suggest that the problems that occurred at some of the subsystems have an overall impact on the system (Santrock, 2008). The violence, which was experienced by some teachers in the participant schools, had a negative impact on the schools. The victimised teachers, other teachers and some learners felt violated. The killing of a teacher at BHS for example had negative repercussions for learners and teachers. The teacher who was threatened at BHS also left the school.

At mesosystem level, I found that intricacies of violence experienced by teachers were apparent through the interactions of microsystems of family and school (Santrock, 2008). Some learners regarded parents as a support system that could be used against the teachers. Thus, they threatened teachers about the possibility of soliciting the assistance of parents to instigate violence against teachers. In addition, the relationship between home and school confined the discussion to the resolving of learner-on-teacher violence through punitive measures such as warning suspension and expulsion.

Implications for School Leadership

Based on the views of teachers pertaining to intricacies of learner-on-teacher violence, I also highlight leadership implications. Although the forms of violence reported in this paper did not occur regularly in the two participant schools, their occurrence negatively affected the teachers and the functioning of these schools (Burton, 2008). The findings suggest that the responses of the school managers to learner-on-teacher violence were reactive and limited to suspension of learners. The principals of the participants schools and other school managers struggled to address violence experienced by the teachers. Newly appointed teachers, for instance, were victimised while they were teaching. This illustrates that there was a need for the principals and other members of School management teams to guide the said teachers on how to tackle learner to teacher violence. As observed by House (1996) positional leaders should supervise their subordinates by creating a clear and easy path to be followed. Dambe and Moorad (2008) contend that visionary leaders move an organisation from a stagnant position to the stage where goals can be realised. It is arguably, that educational goals can hardly be achieved effectively where teachers are victimised by their learners.

The findings also suggest that teachers should partake in addressing violence. The teachers should provide direction to learners for acceptable behaviour since leadership as a process can be exercised by anyone regardless of their positions (Bush et al., 2010). In South Africa, it is a policy mandate that teachers should be leaders (South African Department of Education, 2000).

The views of teachers pertaining to their experience of violence imply that they lack capacity to address such violence. The absence of staff development means that teachers and principals may not keep abreast of trends regarding leadership strategies appropriate in addressing learner-on-teacher violence. As a result, a sense of inspiration and renewal necessary for meaningful education is lost (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002). Staff development is of paramount importance (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005) and as such, there is a need for principals, teachers and learners to be capacitated on school violence issues. Since

leadership is a process that can be exercised by anyone within schools (Bush et al, 2010), it is of paramount importance to create inclusive leadership involving learners and teachers to address violence.

Conclusion

While more research has focused on school violence as it pertains to learner on learner, violence experienced by teachers is also a serious concern. The findings in this paper have shown that physical violence and threats of violence instigated by learners against the teachers may have a pronounced negative impact on members of the school community as well as on teaching and learning. This violence is complex as it unfolds within interconnected systems and subsystems. An understanding of various stakeholders' relationships within these systems is essential for schools to address learner-on-teacher violence effectively. I, therefore, conclude that it is imperative for principals and other teachers provide a vision and direction for non-violent relationships between learners and teachers.

This paper explored intricacies of learner-on-teacher violence from the perspectives of principals and teachers. In this way, the paper privileged the voices of those who experience learner-on-teacher violence as knowers and actors. Thus, the paper adds to the debates pertaining to the need to consider the complexities of school violence as a phenomenon that affects different stakeholders. In order to enhance our understanding about learner-on-teacher violence more research is required. Longitudinal research is necessary to paint a broader picture of learner-on-teacher violence in South African schools.

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