

Prevalence and prevention of interpersonal violence in urban secondary schools: an ecosystemic perspective

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This article aims to describe the prevalence and nature of learner violence in urban secondary schools and what school staff members, learners and parents perceive as the major contributing factors to either promoting or preventing interpersonal adolescent violence. Adolescents' behaviour and development are to a large extent influenced by the type of relationship they have with school staff members, their parents and peer group. This article provides an overview of the empirical study and a discussion of the main research findings that should assist schools and families with collaboratively identifying and addressing the social and ecological factors that either promote or prevent aggressive or violent adolescent learner behaviour.

Voorkoms en voorkoming van interpersoonlike geweld in stedelike sekondêre skole: 'n ekosistemiese perspektief

Die doel van die artikel is om die navorsingsbevindings van 'n studie oor die voorkoms en aard van adolessente geweld in stedelike sekondêre skole te beskryf en aan te dui wat skoolpersoneel, leerders en ouers beskou as die belangrikste faktore vir die bevordering of voorkoming van interpersoonlike adolessente geweld. Tienergedrag en -ontwikkeling word in 'n groot mate beïnvloed deur die tipe verhouding wat hulle met die skoolpersoneel, hul ouers en portuurgroep het. Die artikel bied 'n oorsig van die empiriese studie en bespreek die belangrikste bevindinge wat skole en families in staat sal stel om gesamentlik daardie sosiale en ekologiese faktore wat óf tot adolessente leerder-geweld bydra óf dit kan verhoed, te identifiseer en aan te spreek.

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Although considerable research has explored the school context in an effort to identify the factors contributing to academic failure and anti-social behaviour (Furlong *et al* 2004), there are major areas that still need to be addressed, including research which helps identify the social factors that result in and maintain positive outcomes in the social environment of the school and school community (Osher *et al* 2003). Adelman & Taylor (2006: 38-43) argue that the widespread problem of unsafe schools is often linked to societal and environmental factors that may act as barriers to healthy and positive learner development and socialisation. The reality is that many young South Africans perceive violence as a normal and acceptable way of life (Pelser 2008). As important education institutions, schools are obliged to end the cycle of violence by addressing the societal systemic violence that has apparently infiltrated our schools (Furlong *et al* 2005). It is clear from this empirical evidence that attention should be paid not only to individual incidents of violent behaviour but also to monitoring the school climate and school environment. Schools must seek and address the factors that can cause aggressive or violent learner behaviour (Osher *et al* 2004). This article aims to report on the research findings pertaining to the prevalence and nature of learner violence in two different urban secondary schools and what school staff members, learners and parents perceive as the major factors contributing either to promoting or to preventing interpersonal adolescent violence.

1. Conceptualisation

DeVoe *et al* (2005: 26-35) describe school violence as a specific category of youth violence. It is classed as any behaviour that is intended to physically or emotionally harm persons in a school and their property. This includes threatening with or without a weapon, fighting, stealing and damaging property, bringing to school or using a weapon at school, gender violence and bullying. Extreme forms of youth violence have received a great deal of attention worldwide, though less attention has been paid to lesser forms of violence, such as bullying. Over the past decade aggression and bullying in schools have moved from being

considered a “normal” part of growing up to a public health and social problem that is to be addressed and solved. This change in perspective is the result of research, showing the high prevalence of physical, verbal and relational aggression in schools, as well as the emotional and physical damage caused by all forms of aggression (Furlong *et al* 2005). Extensive research by Adelman & Taylor (2006), Christie *et al* (2004), and Smith & Sandu (2004) have sought to identify various personal characteristics and environmental conditions that either place children or adolescents at risk of violent behaviour or that seem to protect them from the effects of risk.

Recently, several researchers have begun to use the term risk factors and protective factors in these domains to define the factors that appear to increase or decrease, respectively, the occurrence of health-compromising or, conversely, health-enhancing behaviour. The identification of these factors would explain why adolescents engage in particular behaviours and become the foundation for the design of intervention or prevention (Catalano *et al* 2002). Risk and protective factors can be found in every aspect of the adolescent’s life. Research has identified various individual, family, peer group, school and community risk factors which can contribute to youth violence (Mercy *et al* 2002). It appears that these factors produce different effects at different stages of development.

During adolescence, the influence of family is to a large extent replaced by peer influence. It appears that in this age group (13- to 18-year-olds); the strongest risk factors are weak ties to conventional peers, belonging to a gang and involvement in other criminal acts (Elliott & Tolan 1999). Risk factors seem to operate in clusters and the greater the number of risk factors to which a young person is exposed, the greater the likelihood of that person becoming violent (Herrenkohl *et al* 2000). Protective factors seem to act as buffers, protecting young people from becoming violent. These factors are also present at various levels but to date these protective factors have not been studied as extensively as risk factors. However, it is equally as important to identify and

understand protective factors as it is to research the risk factors (Resnick *et al* 2004). Violence prevention and intervention efforts depend on identifying possible risk and protective factors. To be effective, such efforts must be appropriate to a young person's stage of development and specifically targeted at that age group – the 15- to 16-year-old adolescent learner in the present study.

Children and adolescents act in vastly different ways at specific age levels. Developmental periods are usually divided into the following time periods, namely infancy (birth to 2 years), early childhood (2 to 6 years), middle childhood (6 to 10 years), early adolescence (10 to 14 years), and late adolescence (14 to 18 years) (McDevitt & Ormrod 2007). Opportunities for development arise when the adolescent's relationships find the emotional and social support that is in line with their needs and capacities at a specific point in their developing lives. The best fit between adolescents and their environment must be worked out through individual experience and then adapted again as development proceeds and situations change (*cf* Berns 2007, McDevitt & Ormrod 2007). Risk to development may arise from direct threats and from the absence of normal anticipated opportunities. Besides obvious biological risks (for instance, malnutrition and injury), socio-cultural risks such as the absence of positive experiences and relationships can also undermine development (Berns 2007). It is evident that, although one cannot deny the existence of problems during the adolescent years or the importance of efforts to prevent problems, the best way to prevent problem behaviour from a developmental systems perspective is to focus on adolescent strengths instead of deficits, and to promote positive changes across the adolescent stage of life (*cf* Bronfenbrenner 2005, Lerner 2006). Briefly, all policies, programmes and interventions should be designed for the specific target population and, in particular, to suit a group's developmental and environmental circumstances (*cf* Schulenberg 2006, Youngblade & Curry 2006).

2. Theoretical framework

Over the past decade, those who study adolescence have generally moved away from a conceptualisation of adolescents grounded in the stages of life described by twentieth-century scholars, such as Piaget and Erikson, to an ecological model in which contextual factors and social settings are viewed as major sources of influence on the developmental processes in a young person's life. As a result, increasing attention is being paid to the ways in which young people's social and cultural factors in the environment affect their biological, behavioural and developmental processes (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2006). What also became apparent is an understanding of the interrelationships between the predisposing factors that create vulnerability and the factors that buffer, moderate or change the path that could lead to delinquency (Blum *et al* 2002). According to Culley *et al* (2006), effective violence prevention programmes are empirically based and recognise the interdependence of people and their environments at multiple levels.

An ecological systems theory, a positive youth development model and a typology of violence are deemed appropriate for viewing the phenomenon of adolescent learners' violent behaviour in the secondary school setting. The ecological systems theory specifies four types of nested environment systems, with bi-directional influence within and between systems. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Child Development (1979) explains child development as happening within four nested systems, namely micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems. Interpersonal violence viewed in the ecological framework is considered the outcome of the interaction between factors at all four of these levels, namely individuals, close relationships, communities and society. First, from an ecosystemic perspective, how the adolescent learner behaves and develops will be influenced by his/her relationships with school staff members, peers, family members and community members (ecological theory) (*cf* Bronfenbrenner 1979 & 2005). Secondly, the internal characteristics of an adolescent and the external barriers in the systems in the environment (for instance,

home and school) continuously develop and interact with one another (systems theory) (*cf* Von Bertalanffy 1968). Adopting an ecosystemic perspective would help school staff members to understand the multi-level and multi-faceted nature of violence in schools.

There has been another significant conceptual shift from a risk or deficit model – a focus on all that can go wrong with young people – to what is called a positive youth development model (Smith & Sandu 2004). Developmental system theories of human development emphasise that the bases of positive and healthy development across life lie in mutually beneficial relations between the developing person and the resources supporting and promoting healthy growth in his/her environment (Lerner 2004). For adolescents, these theoretical models have been used to frame what has been termed the positive youth development (PYD) perspective (*cf* Lerner 2005, Silbereisen & Lerner 2007). This positive youth development model contrasts with traditional deficit perspectives about young people (*cf* Erikson 1968). In contrast to the problem-focused approach, a positive approach to the prevention of violent behaviour at school focuses on building a set of social and emotional strengths that are incompatible with antisocial behaviour. These strengths include developing emotional intelligence and literacy skills, boosting resilience factors, and establishing a high degree of connectedness between learners and their families, peers, schools and communities (*cf* Silbereisen & Lerner 2007, Smith & Sandu 2004.) Lerner (2004: 109-43) hypothesises that the enhancement of positive youth development should lead a young person to make multifaceted contributions – to self, family, community and civil society – and reduce the likelihood of the emergence of risk/problem behaviour. In replacing the deficit view of adolescence, the positive youth development perspective views all adolescents as having strengths. This perspective suggests that increased well-being and thriving are possible for all young people by aligning their strengths with the developmental assets present in their social and physical ecology (Silbereisen & Lerner 2007). Unlike traditional problem-

focused approaches, the positive approach to school violence is preventive, solution-driven, and systemic in its efforts. The goal is to enhance the overall well-being of learners and others in the context of the school (Smith & Sandu 2004).

School staff members should also have an understanding of the type and nature of the prevailing forms of violence in their schools if they are to develop effective violence prevention programmes. Accordingly, the typology of violence in the World Report on Violence and Health (Krug *et al* 2002) was adopted for this study. The general definition of violence is divided into three types of violence, namely self-directed, interpersonal and collective violence. It is further divided into more specific subtypes of violence, namely physical, sexual and psychological deprivation or neglect (Krug *et al* 2002). The current study focuses on identifying and preventing interpersonal learner violence in the urban secondary school setting.

3. Research design and methodology

The research problem is the nature and prevalence of violence in two urban secondary schools and how school staff members, learners and their parents experience and deal with the prevention of interpersonal violence in the school context. This study was rooted in the sociological interpretive paradigm, and an exploratory and descriptive case study of a qualitative nature was selected to provide an in-depth description of the case (Creswell 2002). As an interpretive, inductive form of research, the present study explores the details and meanings of experiences and does not usually attempt to test a prior hypothesis. An attempt is made to identify important patterns and themes in the data by employing multiple sources of data found in the school settings (McMillan & Schumacher 2006). An in-depth investigation was conducted into the effect that collaborative efforts among school staff members, learners and their parents have on addressing the factors that can either contribute to or prevent learner violence in the urban secondary school setting.

3.1 Purposeful selection strategies

McMillan & Schumacher (2006: 319) refer to Patton (2002: 242) by stating that purposeful sampling, in contrast to probabilistic sampling, is “selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth, when you want to understand something about those cases without needing or desiring to generalise to all such cases”. Therefore the logic of purposeful sampling is that a few cases studied in depth yield many insights into the topic, as was the case with the current study. Two secondary schools in a specific neighbourhood were purposefully chosen because, although they are situated in the same urban area, the socio-economic backgrounds as well as the racial compositions of their learner populations are very diverse. The first school is a public, co-educational English-medium secondary school situated in a middle- to lower income residential area. The second school is a co-educational English-medium private school situated in an affluent residential area. Neighbourhood characteristics have been found to play an important role in promoting adolescents’ well-being and their community characteristics, such as residential stability and income, have been linked to risk-taking attitudes and aggressive behaviour among adolescents (Watt 2003: 346). Empirical evidence indicates that more violent incidents happen at urban secondary schools (Leoschut & Burton 2006). Selecting participants from all the stakeholders at both school sites was important, as each of these subsystems plays an integral role in the school system.

The population units of analysis for this study included five selected school staff members, a class of Grade 9 learners (N = 22, 16, respectively) and six parents from each school. The rationale for specifically including Grade 9 learners was that empirical evidence suggests that the age of highest risk for the initiation of serious violent behaviour is between 15 and 16 years (Grade 9) (Elliot 1994). A combination of purposeful sampling strategies, namely criterion sampling and snowball sampling, was employed to select information-rich cases and settings in order to gain

insight into the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (*cf* Miles & Huberman 1994).

3.2 Data collection strategies

The researchers employed multi-method strategies (*cf* McMillan & Schumacher 2006), and interviewed, moderated and kept field notes. A two-pronged approach to collecting the data was used. After gaining entry to the two school sites, initial in-depth, semi-structured pilot interviews were conducted with the two principals at both sites. This enabled the researchers to build rapport with them and to evaluate the applicability of the interview guide. Data were collected from different sources at both schools, using multiple methods in a four-phase sequential data collection process. Phase one consisted of conducting key informant interviews with four selected Grade 9 teachers at both school sites, using the interview guide (*cf* Polkinghorne 2005). Group interviews were conducted with a class of Grade 9 learners at both school sites in phase two. The interviewing process was concluded by conducting individual, dyad and triad interviews with six parents at both school sites in phase three. All interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed (*verbatim*) and incorporated in the data analysis process. The review of school documents (school prospectus, code of conduct, Grade 9 life orientation curriculum, health and safety policy) pertaining to the collaborative nature of the school violence prevention strategies concluded the data collection process. Multi-method strategies permitted the triangulation of the data across the different enquiry techniques, which provided a balanced and multi-faceted enquiry and resulted in enhancing the trustworthiness of the study (*cf* Bryman 2008).

3.3 Data analysis procedures

The data was analysed manually following the specific qualitative analytical steps of the “framework approach” described by Ritchie *et al* (2003: 219-62). By developing a hierarchical thematic framework, the data were classified and organised according to

key themes, concepts and emergent categories (Ritchie *et al* 2003: 219). Using constant comparative content analysis, the collected interview data were then selected, categorised, compared and interpreted. The data as well as the research questions, theoretical frameworks, and prior knowledge gained through the literature review were used as a guide in analysing and interpreting the data. The review and analysis of the school documents allowed the triangulation of the data and concluded the data analysis process (*cf* McMillan & Schumacher 2006).

3.4 Rigour and ethical considerations

Prior to conducting the study, informed written consent was received from the Department of Education, and the principals of both schools. A participant information letter was issued, requesting the voluntary participation of the purposefully selected school staff members, Grade 9 learners and parents. All three population units of analysis granted their informed written consent, while proxy consent was also obtained from the parents/guardians of the learners who participated in the group sessions. Confidentiality and anonymity were respected and adhered to during and on completion of the study. When reporting the findings after conducting qualitative content analysis, as was the case in the current study, Graneheim & Ludman (2004: 105-12) suggest that credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability should be applied. The credibility or internal validity of the study was enhanced by means of the triangulation of data collection methods and data sources as well as by conducting “member checking” (Bryman 2008: 377). Sufficient description of the case was provided, enabling readers to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence whether the findings can be transferred (Merriam 1998). Complete records of all the phases in the research process were kept for peer review, and this contributed to the dependability of the study. Requesting stakeholder reports from both the schools after they had reviewed and commented on the research findings, contributed to the

confirmability of the study as they confirmed that possible researcher bias did not sway the research findings (Bryman 2008).

4. Research findings

The qualitative analytical steps of the framework approach were followed to work through each interview transcript and relevant school documents (*cf* Ritchie *et al* 2003). Applying constant comparative analysis assisted with converting the data into systematic categories, which resulted in the emergence of the five themes depicted in Table 1. For the purpose of this article, only the main research findings as they pertain to Theme 2: Violent learner behaviour are discussed in order to answer our research question.

Table 1: Thematic framework (code families/categories)

Theme 1: School climate and culture
Theme 2: Violent learner behaviour
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nature and prevalence• Contributing factors• Preventive factors
Theme 3: Violence prevention strategies
Theme 4: Family-school collaboration
Theme 5: Suggestions for addressing school-based violence

4.1 Violent learner behaviour

4.1.1 Nature and prevalence of violent learner behaviour

Serious acts of physical or sexual assault were not reported at the selected school sites. The most prevalent type of aggressive learner behaviour at School 1 is bullying. Bullying among the boys generally takes the form of fist fights, intimidation, pushing/shoving or name-calling. Girls tend to bully verbally or spread rumours and gossip about one another. Theft of personal belongings as well as smuggling in illegal substances (drugs and

alcohol) and weapons can also cause problems. Table 2 summarises the nature and prevalence of learner violence at School 1.

Table 2: School 1 – Nature and prevalence of learner violence

Nature	Prevalence	School staff	Learners	Parents
Physical fighting – fist fights – usually boys	twice a month	√	√	√
Boys carrying knives	regularly	√		
Verbal bullying – mainly girls gossiping – mainly girls	weekly	√ √	√ √	
Drug dealing Drug use Alcohol use Cigarette smoking	regularly	√ √	√ √ √ √	√ √ √ √
Bullying - gender issues - verbal bullying - cultural tension	weekly	√ √ √ √	√ √ √ √	√ √ √
Theft/stealing	regularly		√	
Assault - on teacher - on other learner	once a year	√ √		√ √
Pushing/shoving	regularly			√

The school staff members at School 2 stated that alcohol abuse and verbal bullying (for instance, name-calling, homophobic bullying, interdenominational verbal abuse, peer group-associated

bullying) were the most prevalent forms of aggressive learner behaviour. Learners and parents concurred that various forms of verbal bullying were the biggest problem. Table 3 summarises the nature and prevalence of learner violence at School 2.

Table 3: School 2 – Nature and prevalence of learner violence

Nature	Prevalence	School staff	Learners	Parents
Alcohol abuse	regularly	√		
Physical fighting – fist fights among boys	sometimes	√		
Verbal bullying between boys	sometimes	√		
Verbal bullying – among girls – cat fights	regularly	√	√	√
Bullying – name-calling	often	√	√	√
Homophobic bullying	regularly	√		√
Bullying – peer group-associated	sometimes	√	√	√
Interdenominational (religious) verbal abuse	sometimes		√	
Intimidation	sometimes			√
Drug use	sometimes			√

4.1.2 Factors contributing to violent learner behaviour

The school staff members, parents and learners at School 1 agreed that family-related factors such as poverty; absent working parents; the education level of parents; bad parent-child relationships, and the absence of adult role models at home contributed the most to aggressive learner behaviour. One educator explained:

I try and treat people with respect so that they can see it modelled, because I think in many cases you find that the children do not have the role models at home [...] You can trace this back. In many of the cases there is a shout for help. Either, 'I do not know who my father is and I am acting out' or 'I am on some sort of substance and I am acting out' or 'I am not being accepted by my peers and I am acting out'. There is always a reason (Interview MV: 11).

The learners felt that the way children were raised influenced the way they acted at school. One learner commented:

Well Ma'am I think it is because it is the way they were raised in a way, like they were never taught how to behave with other friends or how to react so they just decide okay, or I do not know what is going through their minds but then it is like they are not thinking straight or they were not taught how to think or how to react so they just turn to violence (Interview ML5: 38-9).

Cultural and historical, as well as peer- and school-related factors could also trigger aggressive or violent behaviour. One educator explained:

I think maybe it is because of let us say, black cultures. Sometimes you are not supposed to [...] most of them are not free to talk to their parents [...] They (learners) are afraid of their parents sometimes (MKa: 13-4).

One parent commented:

Firstly we are talking of societal factors, factors around the society which has an impact and influence on the particular individual being aggressive and those factors could be what are actually happening around in terms of aggression. What you read in the newspaper in terms of aggression. Do you come across statements that actually encourage violent activities and violent actions? Do you come across activities or do you come across instances where people gain as a result of having engaged in a violent activity? So those things they have an impact and influence on a person (Interview MPR: 9).

The learners described the role that peer groups can play in causing aggressive or violent learner behaviour as follows:

School violence starts when two people disagree, that is how it all starts, when they disagree, and then it turns into like we call it speeches. So after that it turns into violence [...] It is like people

pushing each other and then swearing at each other (Interview ML16: 42).

Another learner added:

Sometimes it is impossible to stop school violence because you earn respect through being strong in the school. Like if they know you can punk them they will never talk to you, they will never push you around or do anything but if you become someone who is just weak ... (Interview ML19: 65).

The staff members at School 2 mentioned that they perceived individual factors, family-related factors, the role the school and peer groups played as well as the impact of the media as contributing to aggressive learner behaviour. One educator explained:

I think television has huge impact on it [...] If you look at the greater scheme of things war in Iraq impacts on the children so this is how we solve things, we take out the gun, we stand there and we shoot. I think there is lot of aggression within children these days. I think especially your disadvantaged children, I think have a lot of anger and I think it is part of their upbringing where they – you know it is like we have it here where you have peer groups and those groups stick together and no one is allowed to come into the group or leave the group, I think it is more so there where it is a case of having to survive and the only way we survive is by putting people into their place and how do we do that? We sort them out with violence (Interview BR: 26).

The learners stated that they perceived individual factors and the violence depicted in the media as the main factors contributing to learners acting in a violent way. The parents regarded cultural and historical factors, community and family-related factors as contributing most to how the learners behaved at school.

4.1.3 Preventive factors in violent learner behaviour

Regarding the prevention of adolescent violent behaviour, the staff members at School 1 suggested that if parents would motivate their children to participate more in sport and extramural activities, the learners would have a positive outlet for their energy and frustration, which could help to prevent learners from acting aggressively. It was also apparent that those learners

who participated in sport and extramural activities excelled academically as well as being the leaders. Unfortunately, only 10% of the learners at School 1 participated in sport and after-school cultural activities. The learners suggested that if more were done to teach them how to show respect for one another's cultures, this could prevent the cultural tension that could result in violence. The parents suggested that the learners should have adult supervision in the afternoons as that was the time when they generally were in trouble.

At School 2 the strategies for good school discipline and monitoring systems as well as good parent-teacher communication and parental support are viewed as the best preventive measures. Being a small school also helps the school staff members to address problems immediately. The good learner interaction, spirit of camaraderie and participation in team sport give the learners a sense of belonging, resulting in good social interaction. The learners also stated that they could trust their teachers and communicate openly with them, but that they (the learners) needed to act with more tolerance and be trained to be self-disciplined. The parents stated that more family time, good parent-child communication, participation in extramural activities and parents' liaising with one another regarding the whereabouts of their children are the best preventive measures against violence. Using the social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 2005), the factors perceived by the participants at School 1 and School 2 as possibly contributing to or preventing aggressive interpersonal learner behaviour are depicted in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

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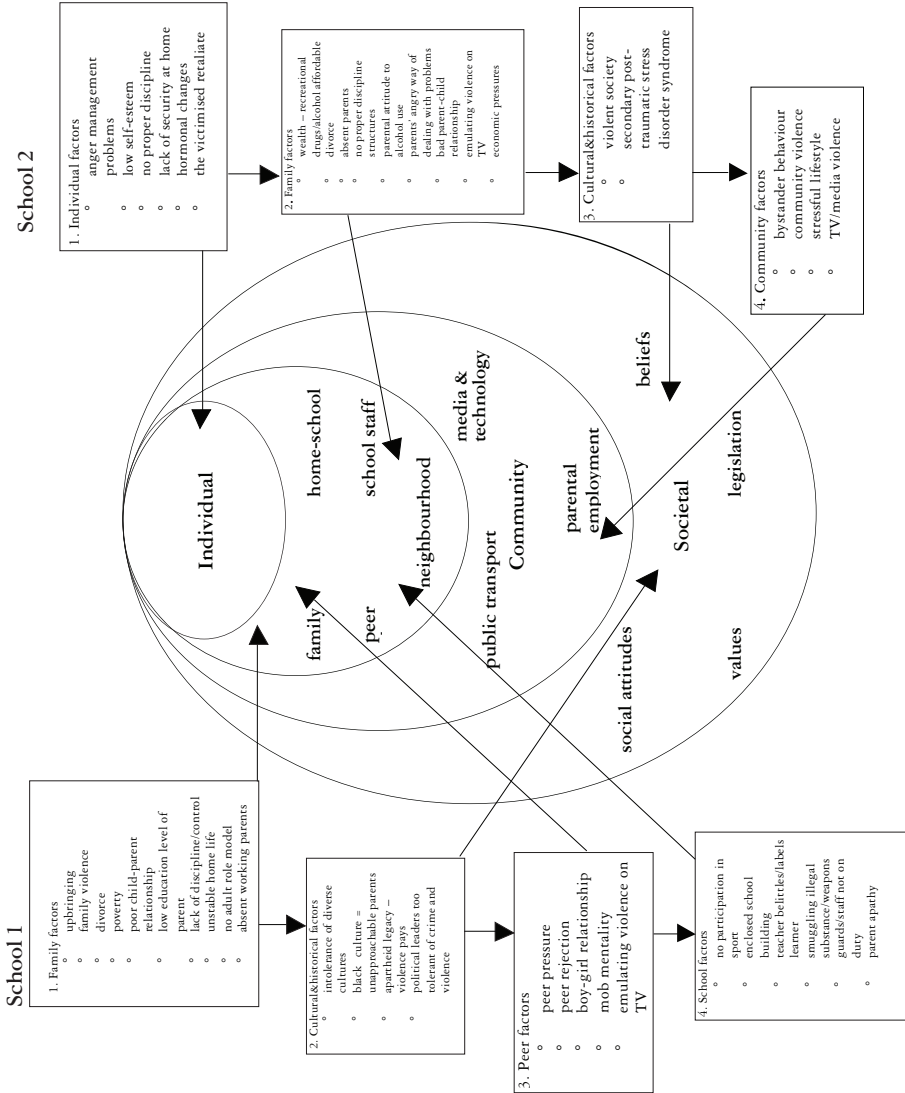


Figure 1: Factors contributing to learner violence: ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 2005)

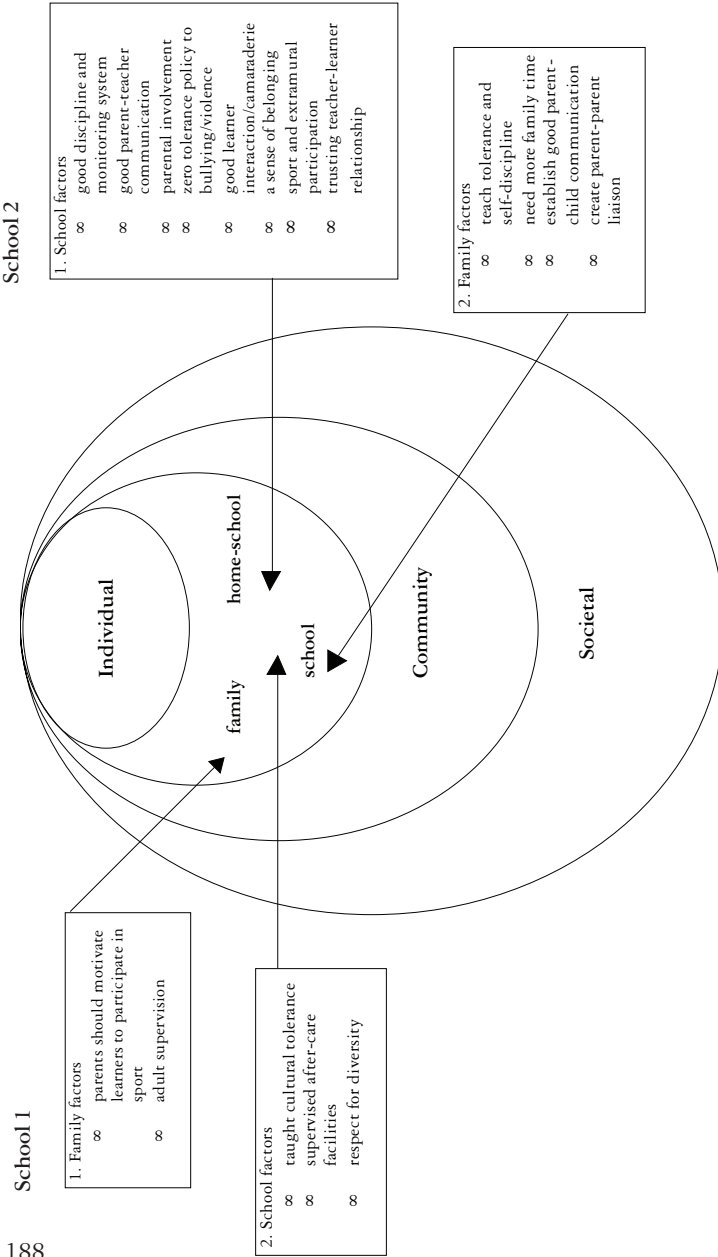


Figure 2: Factors preventing learner violence: ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 2005)

5. Interpretation and discussion

Although only some schools experience the same types or levels of violence, empirical evidence suggests that certain themes run through the literature, pointing to at least seven specific manifestations of violent behaviour that broadly affect schools in South Africa (*cf* Khan & Burton 2006). These include, but are not limited to, theft and vandalism; lack of respect for, and threats against teachers; bullying among learners; physical assaults; weapons in school; gender violence and sexual assault, and gangs. It is important to note that these are not discrete themes because the concepts overlap and interact in their manifestation and effects. However, each theme highlights different aspects of the problems facing South African schools (*cf* Braun 2007). The research findings of the current study underscore this evidence. Bullying is perceived as the most prevalent form of aggressive behaviour at both of the selected urban schools. These findings are in line with international (*cf* Furlong *et al* 2005, Olweus 2001) and national (*cf* Leoschut & Burton 2006, Liang *et al* 2007) trends confirming that bullying is currently a serious problem in schools, but it is not easy to address bullying. As children enter adolescence, this form of aggressive interpersonal behaviour becomes subtler, involving gossip, social exclusion and other forms of indirect aggression.

As the participating learners at School 1 explained, many aggressive learners have high levels of status, popularity and admiration from their peer group and the school. Therefore, as aggression becomes more the norm during adolescence, it is less likely to provoke peer rejection and more likely to elevate the bully's social status (*cf* Guerra & Leidy 2008). In more disadvantaged contexts, in particular, where resources are scarce, high levels of adolescent aggression may result not only in elevated status but also in a wide range of benefits, including material goods, protection and power. In other words, for some young people in some school settings, aggression may lead to high status and dominance in the social group (*cf* Guerra & Leidy 2008). To the extent that aggression and popularity are linked in a given peer context, being "tough" and aggressive might be considered

a desired goal. This might also hinder efforts to encourage bystanders to intervene and stop aggression, particularly if this behaviour has a risk of loss of school status (Guerra & Leidy 2008: 287). The participating learners at School 1 clearly expressed this view. Therefore the motivation to change cannot be assumed and may require moving beyond zero-tolerance policies in order to discount the normative reward structure in the peer group (*cf* Guerra & Leidy 2008).

Bystander behaviour was viewed as contributing to bullying at School 2 because the general perception among the respondents was that, provided one was not the one being bullied, one need not get involved. Whitted & Dupper (2005: 167) argue that the repercussions of bullying, even if it does not escalate into violence, affect all the learners in the school, not only the victims and the bullies. If bullying is ignored and aggressive behaviour not addressed, learners are likely to become more aggressive and less tolerant. Theft of personal belongings, lack of respect for and threats against teachers and other learners, physical fighting and carrying weapons also occur at School 1. At School 2 the manifestations of violent behaviour include theft of personal belongings, physical fighting and alcohol use. Consequently, bullying and all other types of aggressive behaviour negatively affect the school climate and the learning environment (De Wet 2007: 193). The origins of bullying and other forms of aggression are often complex, and empirical evidence highlights that it is important for educators to select an intervention that best suits their school ecology (*cf* Furlong *et al* 2005).

As the current study and previous empirical evidence (*cf* Twemlow & Cohen 2003) have shown, school staff members, learners and parents must be consulted in order to identify the nature and prevalence of existing types and levels of adolescent violence. School staff members need the input from these key role players if they want to identify and address these problems effectively. Schools cannot ignore or, even worse, pretend that they do not experience learner aggression or violence at some level. School staff members, learners and families should all

take responsibility for creating safe school environments (Centre for the Study and Prevention of Violence 2008). As Twemlow & Cohen (2003: 121) state: "At the end of the day all violence prevention programs come down to relationships: our ability to listen to ourselves, to recognize others' experiences and use this information to solve problems, to learn and be creative together."

The participants at School 1 attributed three of the four major contributing factors to the adolescent's three most influential social contexts, namely the family, peer group and school. Bronfenbrenner (2005: 260-73) explains that the ecosystem links these microsystems through the relationships that the adolescent learner has with his/her parents, peers and the school staff members. The various family factors to which the adolescent is exposed affect the learner's socio-emotional development, which may influence how the learner will behave at school (*cf* Parke & Buriel 2006). The school staff members are of the opinion that many parents do not instil good discipline at home as they believe that disciplining their children is the sole responsibility of the school. A consistent finding in the research literature is that certain parenting practices and parent-child relationships can increase the likelihood of child aggression. Children who suffer rejection, neglect or indifference from parents are more likely to display aggressive behaviour. The quality of these relationships also influences child aggression, in particular, the parental expression of anger promotes aggression in children (*cf* Patterson 2002). In adolescence, a lack of parental monitoring is associated with higher levels of aggression, violence and delinquency, as well as poorer relations with peers and teachers (*cf* Pettit *et al* 2001). Monitoring means that parents know where their children are, with whom they are and what they are doing. Good supervision allows parents to respond appropriately to antisocial and delinquent behaviours, and minimises the adolescent's contact with risky circumstances (*cf* Guerra & Leidy 2008). Similarly, the adolescent's relationship with his/her peers and school staff members will also affect his/her behaviour at school, at home and in the community at large. Bronfenbrenner's theory posits

that linkages between the family and school are an important mesosystem (*cf* Fiese *et al* 2006). In addition to families and teachers, peers play powerful roles in adolescents' development. Good peer relationships may be necessary for normal development (*cf* Rubin *et al* 2006) and peer relations may influence whether or not children and adolescents develop problems (*cf* Collins & Steinberg 2006).

The fourth factor that the participants perceived as having a major impact on the behaviour of the learners at School 1 was the impact of cultural and historical factors, linking up with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) macrosystem which includes the wider societal influences on the individual. Guerra *et al* recently suggested that culture should be viewed as a key moderator of intervention effectiveness. They define culture as a collection of social norms, beliefs and values that are learned over time and that provide both a worldview and a way of living (Guerra & Knox 2008: 311). Some theorists explain violence as a cultural act in its origins and consequences. In a study on the culture of honour Nisbett & Cohen (1996: 141) argue that in a culture of consumerism, objects form part of the individual's being. For example, to kill or be killed for a pair of shoes means a struggle for the essence, for identity, and violence is the means that allows conquering objects which permit one to be a person. Therefore, one could say that violence gives some sense to some of the senseless actions of many young South Africans, which originated from a cattle-husbandry culture where it was honourable for men to protect their livestock at all costs. The parents of many of the learners at School 1 grew up as part of this culture of honour, and might still subconsciously believe that in certain circumstances it is the honourable thing to revert to violence to protect what is yours. Moreover, many of these parents had been previously disadvantaged under the apartheid regime and that legacy still haunted many families. Although today's 15-year-olds were born after South Africa became a democracy, and many of them grew up in an urban environment, many of the old cultural belief systems and ethnic mistrust are still prevalent in

their homes and communities, which could cause interpersonal, family and peer group tension. Schools should incorporate cultural competence in their prevention strategies by addressing the issues of culture as part of the intervention, so that culture becomes an asset to be enhanced (*cf* Guerra & Phillips-Smith 2006). This is highly relevant for many schools in South Africa, as they accommodate families with very diverse cultures. School staff members should assess the various norms and values of these different cultures regarding appropriate behaviour. If schools are to develop prevention strategies that are developmentally focused and culturally appropriate, they have to acknowledge and accommodate the specific needs and beliefs of their learners and families. Promoting better learner and family support and participation would give the school staff members additional knowledge, skills and resources, which should result in more effective strategies for preventing violence.

The participants at School 2 also perceived that cultural and historical, as well as community factors might contribute to aggressive learner behaviour at school. Living in a violent society also adds to the problem that learners, teachers and parents suffer from secondary post-traumatic stress syndrome, which can result in learners acting aggressively. Pelsler (2008: 8) argues that for a significant portion of South African youth, crime and violence have become culturally acceptable and normalised because of the young people's consistent experience of and exposure to violence in the key institutions of their socialisation – their homes, their schools and their immediate environments. In developing their “broken window theory”, Wilson & Kelling (1982) popularise the idea that neighbourhoods that demonstrate small signs of abandonment or degradation are more apt to experience more serious crime. They claim that a broken window is a sign that nobody cares, so breaking a window does not mean anything. In *The tipping point: how little things can make a difference* Malcolm Gladwell (2000: 166-7) explains that when applying this theory to schools one would expect smaller recurring discipline problems and general disorder to lead to bigger problems with crime and

violence in schools. Snell (2005: 17) argues that if schools have well-kept school environments and if school staff members take a tough stand on small crimes, this should result in fewer and less violent forms of learner behaviour. Controlling crime and incidents of learner aggression or bullying before they escalate into serious acts of violence is a longer-lasting and more effective management strategy in preventing learner violence. The way school staff members and parents portray caring and respectful interaction among themselves influences learners' experience of being members of a community and school. Character formation begins with a caring relationship, first in the home and then at school. Young people who feel cared for will more than likely care for others and should become positive citizens engaging in the moral life of the community (*cf* Greenspan & Shanker 2004). These findings underscore what Burton (2007: 75) refers to as the important "symbiotic relationship" between what occurs in schools and what happens in a learner's home and community. He attributes this interaction to the widespread perception that violence is viewed as a legitimate form of conflict resolution in the South African context. School staff members should take into consideration that individual, peer, family, school and neighbourhood factors across ecological levels influence learner behaviour, and may either promote or prevent adolescent aggression or violence at school. To assist and support adolescent learners effectively, school staff members must identify the risk and protective factors across all these ecological levels when designing and implementing prevention strategies.

The participants at School 2 also perceived that individual factors contributed to aggressive learner behaviour. The majority of its learners come from upper middle-class white families, which share similar cultural and religious beliefs as well as socio-economic status. Therefore, the individual learner may act aggressively because of personal traits or circumstances. The fifth psychosocial stage of Erikson's (1968) life-span development theory corresponds to the adolescent years. He claims that at this stage, adolescents are trying to find out who they are, what they

are all about and where they are going in life. The adolescent learner confronts many new experiences and roles, and has to explore different paths to acquire a healthy identity. However, this experimentation may lead to unacceptable or aggressive behaviour, especially if there is no good family support. Bad parent-child relationships, too much freedom and wealth may also trigger unacceptable or aggressive learner behaviour. Life course theorists presume that the seeds of a criminal career are planted early in life, but young people may begin their trajectory into violence or crime at different times in their lives. Terrie Moffitt (1993: 674-701) argues that there are two main trajectories of delinquency. This theory states that two groups of antisocial youth can be distinguished, based on their ages of onset and trajectories of conduct problems. She suggests that the first group, namely the “early starters” are those life-course persistent offenders and that the “late starters” are the adolescent-limited group of offenders. The majority of this latter group cease or stop offending around the age of 18 (Moffitt 1993: 674). Therefore, school staff members ought to take this differentiation into account if they want to design effective violence prevention strategies that can assist both these groups of adolescent learners.

The participants at both schools viewed the role of the family and school as most important in preventing aggressive adolescent behaviour. Many learners are left alone in the afternoons without any adult supervision, and few of them participate in sports or other after-school activities. This is the time when these young people are vulnerable and could easily become involved in violent activities. Proper adult supervision in the afternoons is viewed as key to preventing violent learner behaviour. Another major preventive factor is parents who motivate their children to participate in sport and other after-school activities. Effective and clear discipline structures at home and in school, as well as parental involvement in and support of their children’s education and school should help adolescents to develop in positive ways and prevent them from acting aggressively, especially as they would have the support and guidance of adult role models. One of

the suggestions the participating learners made was the need for positive adult role models in their lives. Many of them stated that they could not talk to their parents or to school staff members about personal problems or concerns. Research has shown the potential beneficial effect of role models on adolescent outcomes, such as reduced risk behaviour and decreased aggressive behaviour (Aspy *et al* 2004). Previous research has shown that parents and family members, in particular, are perceived as the best role models for adolescents (Hurd *et al* 2008). It is vital for parents and other family members to model pro-social behaviour for their adolescent children, considering that many of the participating learners suggested that they needed at least one person whom they could look up to. Families, schools and the community ought to work together to create a school environment that would facilitate the positive development of all children and young people.

The theory of positive youth development challenges researchers and educators to recognise the importance of improving the major social systems – home, school and community – that can affect young people. Attempts at systemic change are generally represented by programmes seeking to improve aspects of a school's psychosocial climate (*cf* Wilson 2004), to enhance the family environment so that young people can be connected to pro-social adults through mentoring relationships and after-school programmes (*cf* Durlak & Weissberg 2007), and to build connections among families, schools and communities (*cf* Khoury-Kassabri *et al* 2004). Young people should not be overlooked as important contributors to system change. Young people need a variety of opportunities and meaningful roles to contribute to their world, through relationships with adults – parents and educators (*cf* Judd 2006). A growing body of research suggests that young people who feel connected to their schools through involvement in school activities, who perceive school as meaningful and their teachers as supportive, are less likely to be involved in negative and destructive behaviours (McNeely *et al* 2002).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This study focused on the mesosystemic link between the school and home, and how the relationships among school staff members, learners and families influenced the collaborative nature of the two selected schools' violence prevention strategies (*cf* Lawson 2003). The findings and recommendations of this qualitative research study may not necessarily apply to all urban secondary schools. It is also impossible to assume that the contexts or participants of the current study are representative of all urban secondary schools, as the type and levels of learner violence are of a very diverse nature. Based on their specific school and family contexts, therefore, the school staff members, families, learners and policymakers should evaluate the applicability of these findings and recommendations. However, it should be noted that the findings of the current study do support the existing empirical evidence that urges scholars and researchers on school violence to shift their focus from the individual characteristics of victims and perpetrators to an understanding of the way in which the context in and outside the school impacts on school violence (*cf* Furlong & Morrison 2000). Consequently, all these factors must be considered in order to address violent adolescent behaviour at school and to design effective prevention strategies towards promoting the positive development of all adolescent learners.

It is recommended that future research on the prevention of school violence should heed this call and that studies should focus on exploring and identifying the various environmental and societal factors that might have an impact on the way adolescent learners behave at school. By taking a socio-ecological and developmental systems approach, researchers could examine how the external contexts in which a school is embedded interact with internal school characteristics and learner characteristics to influence the levels of learner violence in schools. The culture, norms and values of a country are reflected in the way its citizens view aggressive or violent behaviour. This, in turn, influences the way in which families, school staff members and young people interact with one another. It appears that multiple

ecological factors influence the way in which adolescents behave. As the findings of the current study suggest, effective strategies to reduce violent learner behaviour should address factors in the two key microsystems, namely the school and home, in order to promote more supportive social climates in schools, which should contribute to preventing school-based learner violence. Exploring and comparing these various risk factors and protective factors could assist with designing more effective school-based violence prevention initiatives that would contribute to the safe and positive development of today's South African youth.

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