

Building School Safety: The Hlayiseka Project – A Whole School Approach

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Introduction

Earlier this year a learner from Siyathuthuka High School shot two fellow pupils after they hit him with a belt during a row over a desk.¹ In another incident in the Western Cape, a 13-year-old boy was stabbed by a 14-year-old boy who was carrying a knife. When asked why, the boy said: 'Because it is the last day of school.'² In KwaZulu-Natal, a Grade 10 pupil was arrested after stabbing a teacher to death at Thornwood Secondary School in Pinetown.³ These are some incidences that have made the headlines in South Africa over the past year.

Childhood is usually associated with innocence and vulnerability, but the gravity of these acts of violence is so calculated that it begs the question: why is school violence so pervasive and what can we do to curb this growing phenomenon?

The South African constitution makes schooling compulsory for all children between the ages of seven and 15 years. The school as an institution is a powerful agent of socialisation: not only is the education system entrusted with ensuring that young people explore career paths that will build the future of the country and economy, it is also a time during which new behaviours are learnt, friendships and relationships are formed, perceptions are influenced and personalities are developed. The schooling system therefore plays an important role in shaping a young person's path in life.

Literature posits that children who achieve poorly at school, who are not committed to school, who have low educational aspirations and who change schools often,

are more likely to engage in violent behaviour.⁴ It is thus critical that we find a way to nurture and restore safe schools. Academic excellence cannot be divorced from school safety and learner support: these elements are interactive and interdependent.⁵ Learners cannot learn and educators cannot teach in an environment that threatens their physical safety and compromises their emotional development and stability.

Violence in schools

In a recent study conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) on the extent and nature of violence in schools, it was found that a total of 15.3% of all learners between grades 3 and 12 had experienced some form of violence while at school.⁶ Threats of violence were common at both primary and secondary schools, with 10.8% of primary school learners and 14.5% of secondary school learners reporting that they had been threatened with violence. This implies that a significant number of children within schools live with the constant threat and fear that something bad could happen to them.

One in 20 learners reported experiencing incidents of physical assault at school. Robberies are also quite common: 3.1% of primary school learners and 5.9% of secondary school learners reported experiencing robberies while at school. Also significant is the fact that primary school boys (2.5%) are more likely than girls (0.2%) to report having experienced sexual violence, while at secondary schools, girls (4.8%) are three times as likely as boys (1.4%) to have been raped or sexually assaulted.⁷



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'There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected and that their lives are free from fear and want and that they grow up in peace.'

Kofi Annan, quote in Morrison B, Restoring Safe School Communities – A Whole Perspective to Bullying, Violence and Alienation, Federation Press, Sydney, 2007.

Of great concern is the fact that seven out of ten primary school learners and almost half of secondary school learners reported that they were physically beaten, spanked or caned when they had done something wrong at school. This correlates with a previous study conducted by the CJCP in 2005, which reported that just over 51% of learners had experienced corporal punishment at school. The 2005 CJCP study also established that 41.5% of children and youth between the ages of 12 and 22 years were victims of crime or violence between the period September 2004 and September 2005. This further suggests that young people in South Africa are twice as likely as adults to be victims of crime and violence.⁸

Both studies highlighted the fact that specific areas in schools – for example, the toilets, open grounds and playing fields, and classrooms – are sites where they are generally vulnerable to experiencing violence. Perpetrators were in most cases fellow learners and peers, and therefore known to the victims. Access to alcohol, drugs and dangerous weapons (guns and knives) are reported to be easily obtainable by learners, creating further challenges to achieving school safety.

Understanding why violence occurs in schools: Social Learning Theory perspective

There is no single theory or developmental trajectory that leads to long-term antisocial and aggressive behaviour. The social learning model emphasises the importance of multiple proximal factors related to aggression occurring in daily social exchanges between children and their siblings and parents within dysfunctional families.

The foundation of the social learning theory is that youth begin to learn aggressive behaviours through everyday social exchanges between family members, as well as through exposure to parenting styles that include inconsistent discipline, with both negative and positive reinforcement of antisocial behaviours.⁹ The acquisition of any complex social behaviour, such as aggression, occurs through the process of social learning.

As children develop they are exposed to a variety of social sources which leads them to develop their own moral standards. These sources include direct teaching, evaluative reactions to their own behaviour and exposure to the standards by which others evaluate themselves. Children not only learn from their environment, but their behaviour elicits reactions from the environment. This is called reciprocal determinism. As time passes children's behaviour affects the aspects of the social environment to which they are exposed, and in turn those environments modify their behaviour.¹⁰

In the National Victimization Study conducted by the CJCP in 2005, many young people reported being exposed to incidences of violence within their home and communities. Extensive international literature suggests that exposure to violence and crime at a young age, including acts of personal victimisation, is likely to impact significantly on the individual's likelihood of engaging in antisocial or criminal behaviour. This consistent exposure to violence – along with poor role-modelling and parenting and teaching styles that are punitive – allows the child to develop a repertoire of behaviours that include aggression as a way of dealing with conflict and difficult life situations.

Exploring an intervention to address school violence

Given the extent to which school violence was reported within the media, as well as the need to develop an intervention that would begin to address the issues in a proactive manner, the National Department of Education and the Open Society Foundation of Southern Africa (OSF-SA) undertook a four-year partnership. The OSF in 2004 commissioned a baseline study in 100 schools in the Limpopo and Eastern Cape provinces. The baseline study provided an understanding of what was happening in schools at the time and made the following key recommendations:

- The study located the school as an integral part of the community and spoke about the importance of partnerships with stakeholders in communities. In this way communities



can take ownership of what happens in and around the school. Clustering schools also provides support and increases capacity to sustain an intervention that promotes school safety.

- Early detection of incidences of crime and violence at schools should form part of an effective crime prevention strategy at school level. Training educators to identify the early warning signs would assist the school to be proactive in its response to crime and violence at schools.
- The study also raised the importance of a strategy that included situational crime prevention. The erection of safety structures at schools such as fences, alarm systems, employing security guards, access control on to the school property, etc. are a critical part of creating a safe environment. However, this alone is not sufficient to create a caring, safe environment. Other critical components for creating school safety include ensuring that the school is compliant with relevant policies and legislation, promoting democratic management and decision making, and instilling a culture of human rights and respect for each other. Adopting a more developmental approach to achieving school safety would have more long-term positive effects.

The findings of the baseline study were used to develop an intervention that would best address school violence. This intervention was piloted in three provinces, namely the Eastern Cape, Western Cape and Limpopo. A process evaluation was completed which informed the production of a toolkit that would assist schools to address school violence.

Defining an approach

Research suggests that there are many explanations for school violence. This paper uses the social learning theory to offer some framework for understanding the phenomenon of school violence.

The South African education system has been plagued with many challenges as a

result of the legacy of apartheid. Unifying a number of education departments, restructuring policies and redistributing resources to bring greater parity to education have been some of the daunting challenges of the democratic dispensation. The escalating level of violence in schools has made transformation of this institution particularly difficult.

In attempting to define an approach to address school crime and violence, the CJCP considered a number of factors. First, there is no blanket approach to addressing school violence. Different provinces have different nuances and issues which need to be addressed and any intervention needs to be flexible yet encompassing. Violence, as the research suggests, affects learners and educators differently. As such, all angles and role-players need to be considered in attempting to develop an approach to school safety. Violence also affects girls differently to boys, and gender implications would need to be addressed when developing an intervention.

Second, safety cannot be separated from the core business of the school – that is, teaching and learning – and therefore a whole school approach whereby all stakeholders take ownership is not only encouraged but is critical to success in this regard. Third, the needs of learners need to be viewed in a holistic developmental manner. This approach therefore acknowledges that a hungry learner cannot be a productive learner, and a scared learner cannot concentrate optimally on the process of learning.

After carefully reviewing the challenges of the education system and the recommendations made by the baseline study, the CJCP designed an approach that is targeted at the school management team. This approach, named the Hlayiseka Project (Tsonga for 'be safe'), assists schools to identify and deal proactively with issues of crime and violence through consultation, effective reporting and feedback systems.

Principles underlying the Hlayiseka Early Warning System

The literature indicates that a functioning

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A big part of creating a caring atmosphere is being inclusive, that is, giving all role-players in the school a say in solving problems at the school and settings the rules that affect them.

school management team with appointed staff members who are present at work every day will go a long way towards maintaining order and discipline at schools. Further to this, educators need to believe that they can make a difference and that the achievement of academic excellence is possible at their school.

The American Institute for Research's work has indicated that successful schools share the following characteristics:

- A teacher community that focuses on learning.
- The individual teachers have high expectations of their learners. They believe that all learners can learn and that they as teachers can teach them.
- The teachers as a group believe they are collectively accountable for the success of their learners.
- Teachers at these schools do not blame students, students' families or social conditions and instead use a problem-solving approach to resolve issues. This culture of problem-solving, as opposed to blame, is supported by the school leadership.¹¹

According to a study conducted by Dukes in 1989, a school in which learners feel a sense of belonging is least disruptive. A big part of creating a caring atmosphere is being inclusive, that is, giving all role-players in the school a say in solving problems at the school and settings the rules that affect them. This requires democratic school management.

An international review of school strategies to reduce crime and violence undertaken by Shaw in 2001 showed some remarkable results. An example was a disadvantaged school in France where crime and violence levels had soared. The parents, students, community stakeholders, educators and school management got together to negotiate school rules, and what would happen if these were broken. For the first time learners were listened to and their opinions valued. The result was a 60% drop in violence and a 50% drop in verbal abuse

at the school.¹² Breaking the authoritarian approach to the management of schools is a central principle of the Hlayiseka Early Warning System.

The Hlayiseka Early Warning Toolkit

Building blocks and objective

The Hlayiseka Early Warning System is built on four building blocks:

- **Be prepared** to prevent and manage problems.
- **Be aware** of what is happening at school.
- **Take action** when something happens.
- **Take care** to build a caring school.

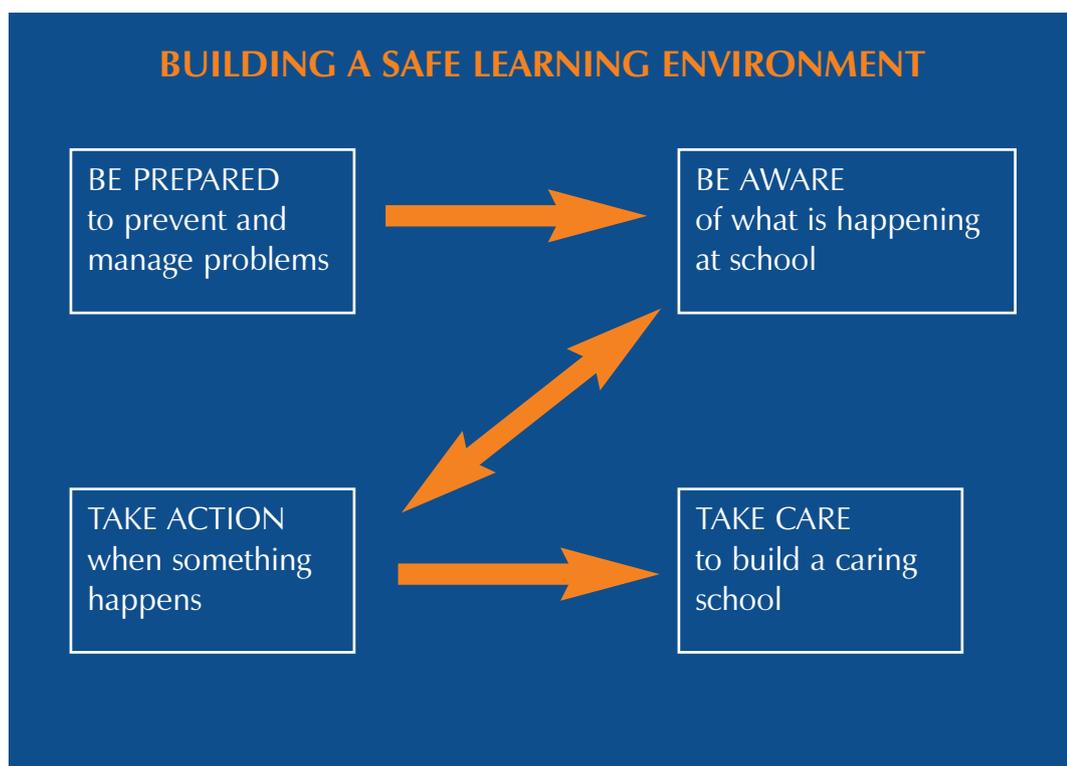
Each building block assists the school to work systematically towards achieving school safety. The broad objectives of the toolkit are to:

- help the school to understand and identify security issues and threats;
- guide schools to respond effectively to security issues and threats;
- establish reporting systems and manage reported incidents appropriately;
- monitor the school's progress over time; and
- integrate existing departmental policy and legislation to ensure that school safety is not an 'add on'.

An overview of the toolkit

The toolkit comprises four booklets and interactive posters, which provide a step-by-step guideline for the school on how to manage school safety. The toolkit acknowledges that each school is at a different point in its journey towards school safety and that available resources and capacity differ from school to school. The toolkit thus allows for the least-resourced school to find an appropriate entry point into the system as well as the most-resourced school.





The nine learner surveys deal with safety spots, routes to and from school, verbal abuse, bullying, dangerous weapons, sexual violence, substance abuse, physical assault and discrimination.

The diagnostic tool

The first tool a school will use is the diagnostic tool. This allows each school to assess where it is with regard to managing safety at the school. The diagnostic tool assists the school to put relevant departmental policy and legislation in place *vis-à-vis* learners, educators and safety. It also ensures that the school is well on its way to developing a democratic, consultative management style through the process of giving educators and learners a voice in the management of safety at the school.

After working through the diagnostic tool and following the simple instructions for putting in place minimum standards for school safety, the school can now proceed to the next phase.

Learner and educator surveys

The second tool allows a school to start identifying the issues that are threatening safety at the school. A set of surveys targeting learners and educators, together with a template, have been developed that facilitate analysis and interpretation of the data.

Nine learner surveys have been developed to allow a school to get more information on the nature and extent of violence at the

school. These surveys deal with safety spots, routes to and from school, verbal abuse, bullying, dangerous weapons, sexual violence, substance abuse, physical assault and discrimination. Research shows that these are common issues which most schools grapple with.

The first and most important survey is the 'safety spots' survey, which provides the school with information on where learners feel vulnerable and where possible hotspots in and around the school are located.

The educator survey is aimed at understanding educators' experiences of violence at school and unpacks what the nature of their experiences may be. The information obtained from the learner and educator surveys will provide the school with a solid understanding of the crime and violence issues at the school from both educator and learner perspectives.

Developing safety plans: The importance of partnerships

Armed with the information it has obtained through the surveys, the school is now ready to develop a plan of action or a 'safety plan'. The school is provided with a step-by-step guide on how to develop its particular safety plan.



Learners at schools which have confidential systems in place, for example a 'complaint box' in a safe space, are more likely to report incidents of crime and violence at school because they feel safe and protected.

As the school is embedded within a community, developing partnerships with other departments and stakeholders in the community is a key element of this approach.

The school is encouraged to set up a referral system of community stakeholders that can provide specific and specialised interventions in the school to deal with emerging problems. In this way all interventions that take place in the school can be coordinated and complemented, and will be set up to achieve a specific goal at the school. The school will also know exactly what is needed by learners and educators and can therefore give priority to those interventions.

The involvement of parents in the safety and development of their children at school should also be included, both for intervention itself or to support work done with learners at school within the home environment. The development of partnerships acknowledges that the school's primary function is that of teaching and learning, and that specialised expertise exist within the community that can enrich the school and its population.

Reporting and recording incidents of violence

The toolkit advocates setting up systems that will facilitate the reporting and recording of incidents of violence. A main finding of the baseline study was that schools are overwhelmed by the amount and range of crime (some petty, others more serious) that takes place at school. Many schools are so inundated with incidents of crime and violence that they are not sure what to report and record. A well-managed school records *all* incidents and uses the information, together with the results from the learner and educator surveys, to inform interventions that take place at the school.

The toolkit will help a school to categorise incidents according to their seriousness and also provides possible options for methods of recording and processing information. Often the school holds a wealth of information that is not systemised and is

therefore not available to provide valuable insights into what might be happening at the school. Monitoring the data that emerges from these processes can provide information regarding crime trends in a particular area.

Mechanism for reporting

Establishing mechanisms that will facilitate confidential reporting is another focus of the toolkit. The CJCP was told by learners during the evaluation of the pilot phase that without proper reporting systems, learners are vulnerable to further victimisation by both other learners and educators. We found, however, that learners at schools which have confidential systems in place, for example a 'complaint box' in a safe space, are more likely to report incidents of crime and violence at school because they feel safe and protected.

Providing feedback to learners who have taken the trouble to report such incidents or experiences will send out a clear message that school safety is being taken seriously and that something will be done to address the issues.

Monitoring and evaluation

It is important that the school is able to track changes in the safety levels of learners and educators over a period of time. The toolkit provides the school with a simple guide on how to establish baseline data about the safety situation at the school and then how to monitor the situation post intervention, to follow any changes.

A well-functioning monitoring and evaluation system will allow the school to be confident in the progress made towards increasing the safety and wellbeing of both its learners and educators at school level. It will also allow the school management to make informed decisions about the type of interventions needed, and when to change or terminate an intervention and focus on a new issue that may have emerged.

Conclusion

The CJCP has learned through systematic research and work with schools that there is



no 'quick fix' solution to dealing with school violence. However, the more systematic one is about implementing a management system, the more success one is likely to have in terms of identifying threats early so that appropriate action can be taken.

While the use of this toolkit does not replace the valuable work done by other practitioners at schools, it does provide an overarching system from which to develop

interventions that can be monitored systematically and which contribute to the broader development of safety and wellbeing at schools.

Nelson Mandela said that education is the most powerful weapon one can use to change the world; as such, we are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that we create safe learning environments where little minds can grow into greatness.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 *The Mercury*, 27 February 2008.
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- 9 Jimerson SR, Morrison GM, Pletcher SW & Furlong MJ, Youth engaged in antisocial and aggressive behaviours: Who are they?, in Jimerson & Furlong, op cit.
- 10 For example, a child whose aggression becomes unacceptable to a gentle group of peers may be rejected by the group. The child will then seek peer groups that accept the aggression and will be rewarded for it. As such, the child moves from a non violent setting to a violent setting. Ward, op cit.
- 11 Burton, *Snapshot Results of the CJCP National Schools Violence Study*, op cit.
- 12 Griggs R, *Preventing Crime and Violence in South African Schools – A Review of Learning and Good Practice from Eight Interventions*, OSF, Cape Town, 2002.



About the author

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She has also served as chairperson on the board of ANEX CDW and REACH. Both organisations work toward advocating for the rights of the most marginalised communities in the Western Cape.

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CJCP mission

The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) is dedicated to developing, informing and promoting innovative evidence-based crime prevention focused on the groups identified as being vulnerable to victimisation or offending. The CJCP does this by:

- conducting rigorous research into issues of relevance to policy makers, public service officials, development partners and crime prevention practitioners;
- facilitating the implementation of crime prevention projects;
- providing sector-specific and accredited training in crime prevention for policy makers, public sector officials and non-governmental organisation practitioners; and
- disseminating the results of its research and lessons learned to relevant audiences.

About this paper

The school is a very powerful institution of socialisation, and the levels of violence currently threatening the wellbeing and development of learners at school are cause for great concern.

The CJCP has recently conducted a National Schools Violence Study, which outlines the extent and nature of violence at schools. This paper discusses an intervention developed in partnership with the National Department of Education, which aims at providing schools with a toolkit for addressing school violence.

The toolkit provides a school with practical guidelines that will assist it to: identify and respond to security issues and threats; establish reporting systems; monitor safety over time; and integrate existing departmental policy and legislation to ensure school safety.

The intervention provides long-term sustainable management that will not only ensure school safety but will transform schools into caring spaces where learners can learn and educators can teach.



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