Views of adolescents on addressing violence in semi-rural secondary schools in Mafikeng, North West province

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Background: Violence is a public health problem and often an issue of criminal justice. Violence in schools is a worldwide phenomenon and exposes adolescents to premature death.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore and describe adolescents' views on addressing violence in semi-rural secondary schools in Mafikeng.

Research design and method: A qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research design was utilised. Purposive sampling was used to select adolescents from semi-rural secondary schools in Mafikeng who fell between the ages of 13 and 20 years and who were involved in community youth groups or associations. In-depth focus group discussion using audiotape, reflexive notes and naïve sketches were used for data collection. The central question which was asked was 'What are the adolescents' views on addressing violence in semi-rural secondary schools?' Data were analysed by means of open coding.

Results: The results showed that adolescents understood the complexities associated with violence in this country, and they suggested multiple approaches and interventions. The adolescents were of the opinion that responsible communication patterns in the school environment could build healthy relationships between learners and educators and lead to a decrease in violence in the school setting. They also felt that enforcement of a secure teaching environment through encouragement of behavioural and attitudinal change guided by school codes of conduct and provision of firm security will help reduce violence in schools.

Introduction

Background

Violence is a public health problem and often an issue of criminal justice (Diego *et al*. 2002:597–598; Hoff, 1995:36). These authors regard violence as a behaviour which exposes adolescents to the possibility of premature death. The phenomenon of violence can be displayed in multiple ways, including victimisation and name-calling (Jewett 2000:1–4; Paetsch & Betrand 1999:351–353). Gang rape is, amongst others, an extreme form of violence. Violence can also be directed at property or towards oneself, such as self-criticism and, worse still, suicide. According to Paetsch and Betrand (1999:351–353) violence leaves lasting impressions on the mental health of both victims and witnesses.

Violence in schools is a worldwide phenomenon, an example being the shootings that took place at Columbine High School in 1999 (Moore 2004/2005:45). A survey carried out by Kohn (2003:92–93) with 1500 teenagers in the United States of America revealed that 21% of non-aggressive secondary school boys and 15% of non-aggressive middle school boys took weapons to school although they were not regarded as aggressive.

South Africans witness incidents of violence in the media every day (Valley 1999:1–11). Headlines have included the murder of a preschool educator on her way home from school, and the brutal murder of a bus driver; unfortunately, in the latter case learners were witnesses of the ugly scene. In another case, a parent waiting in the car for his daughter became another victim. Valley (1999:1–4) is of the opinion that this murder was in retaliation to the earlier shooting of learners by the school principal and his deputy. Other incidents include the over-reported violent behaviour of a Vryburg school learner as well as that of a Klerksdorp school educator, and recently a learner who died at the hands of an educator in a religious rehabilitation school. The stigma attached to South Africa as one of the most violent countries in the world is thus possibly appropriate.

Myburgh and Poggenpoel (2009:451–457), in their meta-synthesis of 11 research projects on learners' experience of aggression in secondary schools in South Africa, found that learners

experience aggression on intrapersonal, interpersonal and environmental levels. Learners' intrapersonal experiences of aggression include negative feelings, perceptions and ideas and the utilisation of defence mechanisms. Interpersonal experiences of aggression include physical, verbal and indirect actions. Environmental experiences of aggression include distrust of teachers, learners' schoolwork being negatively affected, the learning climate being experienced as unsafe and discipline as inconsistent.

Up until now corporal punishment has been regarded by some disciplinarians in institutions of learning as the method of choice for raising and teaching children. Valley (1999:1–4) views school violence as a reflection of the complicated history of South Africa. The amount of violence in this country creates a perception that no rural or urban school or university campus can be considered safe anymore. To this end, Alexander and Curtis (1995:75) and Kelley and Beauchesne (2001:39–42) conclude that violence affects adolescents' development in terms of school functioning, emotional stability and orientation towards the future. In concordance, psychosocial theorists warn that children's exposure to violence causes them extreme emotional trauma (Paetsch & Betrand 1999:351–353). Although numerous factors are influential in aggressive and violent behaviour (McMahon & Watts 2002:416), the focus of this article is not causes of violence but what can be done to address violence in a semi-rural secondary school.

Problem statement

The nature of violence in South Africa is intensifying, with increasing reports of rape, gang rape, molestation, vandalism of school property and robberies (Paetsch & Betrand 1999:351–353). The mental health of adolescents who are exposed to violence is compromised. Against this background the researchers posed the following questions: 'What are the adolescents' views on addressing violence in semi-rural secondary schools?' and 'What recommendations can be made regarding measures to address violence in semi-rural secondary schools?'.

Research purpose

The research purpose was to explore and describe adolescents' views on addressing violence in semi-rural secondary schools.

Research objectives

The research objectives were to elicit adolescents' views on addressing violence in semi-rural secondary schools, and to make recommendations regarding measures to address violence in semi-rural secondary schools.

Definition of key concepts

Adolescent: An adolescent is a person in the period of maturation between childhood and adulthood. This period is marked by exploration and making choices, a process of working to self-integration as a person (Sadock & Sadock 2007:36). Erikson (cited in Sadock & Sadock 2007:210) states that adolescencetakes place from about 13 toabout 21 years of age.

Violence: Violence is a severe form of aggression. Aggression can take the form of violent actions against others with the intent to harm or injure another person. Many behaviours can be aggressive although not involving physical injury. These behaviours can include verbal aggression, coercion, intimidation and premeditated social ostracism of others (Sadock & Sadock, 2007:149).

View: View refers to a way of thinking or an opinion (*Oxford Thesaurus* 1991:537).

Semi-rural: This refers to life in the countryside that is more agricultural in nature (*Oxford Thesaurus* 1991:412).

Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in understanding adolescents' views on how violence can be addressed in semi-rural secondary schools. Adolescents as learners can play an important role in addressing violence in a constructive manner.

Research method and design
Design

The study followed a qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual design. Qualitative research focuses on participants' descriptions of a phenomenon they are familiar with in their own words, and the researchers' observations and experiences (Sapsford & Jupp 2006:20). The whole phenomenon is described rather than its parts (Burns & Grove 2005:9). Exploratory research may be the first stage of a research project to provide the researcher with new knowledge about a phenomenon (Wysocki 2004:79). Descriptive research begins with a well-defined topic that enables the researcher to describe it accurately (Wysocki 2004:79). Description of the context outlines the specific area where the research takes place as well as the specific participants in the research (Huff 2009:225). This article's focus is on exploring and describing adolescents' views on addressing violence in their schools.

Population and sample

Adolescents from semi-rural secondary schools in and around Mafikeng in North West province formed the population from which the sample was purposively selected (Creswell 2007:125). Saturation of data determined the sample size for the focus group and naïve sketches (Creswell 2007: 240). The criteria which were used to select the sample were as follows:

- Adolescents of both genders, aged from 13 to 20 years.
- Enrolment in a semi-rural secondary school.
- Involvement in community organisations, youth clubs,

musical groups or sporting activities (referring to the adolescents' ability to actively engage in the research).

- Ability to communicate in English and any local language. Signing an assent form to participate in in-depth group interviews and write naïve sketches.

Groups that participated in the study included a football group, a church youth club, boys and girls from the Focolare Movement and a group from confirmation class.

Data collection methods

Four in-depth group interviews were conducted (Babbie & Mouton 2002:291–293). The central question was 'What can be done to address violence in a semi-rural secondary school?' The discussion was facilitated through communication techniques such as building a trusting relationship and spontaneous questions around the main question (Struwig & Stead 2001:99). Observations, keywords and phrases were jotted down during discussions with the aim of augmenting the audiotaped information. Naïve sketches were also used as a method of data collection in order to encourage adolescents to describe their viewpoints in-depth in a relaxed and unbiased environment (Arfken, Graves & Pollio 2006:257).

Data analysis

A descriptive and open-coding method (Creswell 2007:239–240) was utilised to analyse the data. The researchers read through the transcribed focus group interviews and written naïve sketches and underlined units of meaning pertaining to adolescents' views on what could be done to address violence in a semi-rural secondary school. Themes and categories were identified.

The results are discussed within the context of the literature in order to enrich them.

Context of the study

The context of this study was semi-rural secondary schools in Mafikeng in North West province. The participants were adolescents aged between 13 and 21 years who were learners in these schools.

Ethical considerations

Ethical measures are moral obligations on the part of the researcher to protect the rights of the research participants. In the case of this study adolescents were protected from psychological and physiological harm through application of ethical measures (Burns & Grove 2005:181–196; Dhai & McQuoid-Mason 2011:14–15). Informed consent was obtained from the parents and informed assent was obtained from the adolescents. Confidentiality was ensured by the researchers during the focus group interviews, and participants were requested to adhere to tenets of confidentiality. The audiotapes were kept under lock and key with only the researchers having access to them. These audiotapes will be destroyed two years after publication of this research.

Trustworthiness

Guba's strategies of truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality were followed in order to establish trustworthiness (Babbie & Mouton 2002:276–278). The following techniques were used to ensure truth value by means of the strategy of credibility: prolonged engagement, reflexivity, triangulation, member checking, peer review and structural coherence. The criterion of applicability was utilised to ensure transferability (Struwig & Stead 2001:122–124). Transferability was fostered through purposive selection of the sample, a description of the demographics of the participants, and a dense description of the results with supporting direct quotations from participants. The criterion of consistency was applied to ensure dependability through a stepwise replication of the research method, code and re-code data analysis, a dense description of the research methodology and peer examination. An audit trail and reflexive notes were used to establish confirmability of the study.

Discussion of results

Four focus groups were conducted and the six participants each completed naïve sketches. One focus group was conducted with six girls and one with six boys; two focus groups were conducted with six participants each (three boys and three girls). Thus two homogenous and two heterogeneous focus groups were conducted. Twenty four adolescents of both genders between the ages of 13 and 20 years participated in the four focus group interviews and wrote naïve sketches. All of these adolescents attended semi-rural secondary schools in Mafikeng in North West province. All were involved in community organisations, youth clubs, musical groups or sporting activities.

The adolescents' views on what could be done to address violence in a semi-rural secondary school are reported by using direct quotations from the group interviews, naïve sketches and field notes.

Feedback from the naïve sketches and group interviews centred on the restoration of universal human values in the school environment. Furthermore, participants verbalised that the school environment should reflect respect for others and self, unity, cooperation, patience, gentleness, tolerance, freedom of expression, self-understanding, openness, confidentiality, trust, forgiveness, self-control and concern for others.

Participants were of the viewpoint that some families lack role models to motivate children about positive values, and the school environment should be able to bridge this gap. Teaching values in schools is recommended and Bassett, Houston and Kidder (2009:25) suggest that kids should be prepared for democracy by teaching them to live in and contribute to a system based on personal ethics and mutual responsibilities.

The following two themes were derived from the analysed data:

- Promotion of responsible communication in the school environment in order to build healthy relationships between learners and educators.
- Enforcement of a secure teaching and learning environment in order to facilitate physical, psychological, social and spiritual well-being.

Theme one: Promotion of responsible communication in the school environmentin order to build healthy relationships between learners andeducators

Promoting responsible communication patterns in the school environment includes fostering a trusting relationship between learners and educators, promoting opportunities for learners and educators to acquire essential interpersonal skills, reinstating socially appropriate boundaries between learners and educators, facilitating and mobilising educators' and learners' resources in order to enable them to become conscious about the needs of others, and providing comprehensive efforts and programmes to assist educators and parents to acquire effective parenting skills. These categories will now be discussed.

Fostering a trusting relationship between learners and educators

Trust is explained by Hawkings and Allen (2001:1545) as the state of being relied on. Fostering a trusting relationship is an outcome of responsible communication and can be mediated in a therapeutic environment. The participants in this study were of the opinion that unity played an important role in ensuring trusting relationships, which was evident in their comments:

Learner 1: '*Teachers and learners and learners between learners should treat each other like brothers and sister.*'

Learner 2: '*Decisions should be taken jointly…*'

Learner 3: '*Teachers and learners should become one, build unity … re ka nna seopo sengwe [we can become one].*'

The participants also found empathy necessary in order to foster a trusting relationship:

Learner 6: '*Teachers should listen to their students and students should listen to their teachers.*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 6, Mafikeng, Mar. 2009)

Learner 7: '*There should be no discriminations but fairness … when teachers and learners practice favouritism it is like apartheid … in the place of favouritism there should be understanding and cooperation.*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 7, Mafikeng, Apr. 2009)

Honesty also aids in creating a trusting relationship between learners and educators, and although learners valued freedom to express their feelings, they felt that this should be done by both parties in a constructive manner:

Learner 7: '*There should be free expressions…*', '*…learners and educators should have self- control … we must try.*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 7, Mafikeng, Apr. 2009)

The participants also expressed a need to experience genuineness from their educators in order to be able to trust them:

Learner 4: '*Gossip about learners by teachers in the staffroom is unacceptable … if learners hear about this they start to hate the teacher.*'

Learner 5: '*It is not for the teacher to talk about the private life of the student.*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learners, Mafikeng, Mar. 2009)

Lastly, the participants believed that an encouraging atmosphere will aid in fostering a trusting relationship in the school environment:

Learner 11: '*We must have hope in God, act in the way that change can happen rather than talk talk talk.*'

Learner 12: '*We must believe in ourselves in order to reduce horrible things happening in our school.*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learners, Mafikeng, Apr. 2009)

Promoting opportunities for learners and educators to acquire essential interpersonal skills

Participants were of opinion that improved communication skills were a necessity in order to combat violence. They were concerned that learners and educators who act violently in schools originate from the same social background with the same resultant interpersonal skills. As said by one adolescent:

Learner 13: '*teachers need to be taught several interactive skills … how to listen … observe non-verbal cues … so that they can become aware about the needs of others.*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 13, Mafikeng, May 2009)

The need for acquiring positive attitudes and behaviours was reflected in the learners' statements:

Learner 8: '*Apart from learners to learners' abuse … teachers also use their authority to bully students … teacher always want to highlight … clarify their concept that they are the boss in class and the school environment.*'

Learner 9: '*Some educators are inclined to always threaten … I am nobody … nothing … that is what bullying does … they too feel helpless … empty.*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learners, Mafikeng, Apr. 2009)

Dwivedi and Gupta (2000:770) are of the opinion that improved communication skills are a prerequisite to be able to address violence in a constructive manner. The art of active listening, observing non-verbal behaviours, taking the context into account, commenting and understanding is essential in communication (Louw & Du Plooy-Cilliers 2003:63–65). There is a need to acquire specifically those skills which could prevent aggressive inclinations and at the same time improve coping skills for those most likely to become victims of violence (Blake & Hamrin 2007: 211).

Aggression is the opposite of assertiveness. Assertiveness by individuals reflects competencies which build friendships

and autonomy and leads to successful achievement of acceptable social behaviours (Shaffer 2002:501). Stuart and Laraia (2005:630–639) regard assertiveness as a basic interpersonal skill. Rawlings, Williams and Beck (1993:320) are of the opinion that assertive training as an element of communication is appropriate for managing aggression, speaking effectively and identifying intimidating factors. Much as assertive behaviour displays self-assurance, it also communicates respect for others, in this way preventing aggressive and violent acts (Crothers, Field & Kolbert 2005:353).

Reinstating socially appropriate boundaries between learners and educators

In this study, use of vulgar language and introduction of substance abuse to school children were cited as examples of boundary violations. One adolescent had this to say:

> Learner 14: *'What I know … what goes on at school … some teachers hang around with girls ... make school children to have no respect for teachers … bring confusion in the school … teachers behave like school children … are the ones who teach children to use dagga* [*marijuana*]*.'*

Yet another said *'Some teacher have just teacher's certificate they are speeders'*. Upon enquiring what he meant, he said:

> Learner 20: *'Don't care attitude and irresponsible, those who do not give advice to learners, use vulgar language, drink with school children, have no respect, fail to assist slow learners, have no patience, are jealous, compete with learners, fall in love with school children.'*
>
> (Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 20, Mafikeng, May 2009)

Learners in one discussion group suggested that *'teachers should stop getting involved with learners … stop impregnating girls … because they distract learners to have no progress … learners may commit suicide'* (Mosome, Connie. Interview with learners 14, 15 and 16, Mafikeng, May 2009). Boundaries serve the purpose of emotional limits of interaction (Rawlings *et al*. 1993: 97–100). Stuart and Laraia (2005:44–6) assume that boundaries encompass factors such as roles, language, time, place and even clothing and physical contact.

It seems adolescents would appreciate both learners and educators practising self-restraint by *'loving one another, encouraging and supporting one another'*. For example, they would like to see *'children doing what they are told to do'* (Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 14, 15, and 16, Mafikeng, May 2009). This, they said, is possible if all children could meet deadlines for homework and projects. As for teachers, it is expected that they should *'count their words, paying attention to things that could be useful. By all means possible the school should promote cooperation'* (Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 18, Mafikeng, May 2009). This view is supported by Jewett (2000:1–4). *'Positive living and revaluing the teacher … learners respecting one another and not competing'* is another means for restoring acceptable boundaries between learners and educators.

Facilitating and mobilising educators' and learners' resources in order to enable them to become conscious of the needs of others

Adolescents were of the opinion that factors such as an impoverished social background were also causes of violence. One adolescent said:

> Learner 19: *'some may not be properly dressed … nowadays some children are absent from school because they are orphaned … or where parents are simply not caring because of substance abuse ... are abusive to them.'*
>
> (Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 19, Mafikeng, May. 2009)

In one group it was revealed that some children came to school ill-dressed and hungry, and as a consequence even grabbed food from others. These adolescents thought that acquiring knowledge about the causes, signs and symptoms, meaning and impact of aggression as well as preventative measures could in many ways prepare them and their educators to address violence constructively within the school and outside in the community.

The idea is that specific information programmes should be put in place. Experts in this field could be called in to offer workshops in their schools. Debates on these matters were also recommended. They thought they could gain the capacity to have a voice and obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of violence, and perhaps even facilitate empathic attitudes towards needy learners.

Delcampo and Delcampo (2002:136–137) posit that teaching children at risk to become resilient could enable them to become active, affectionate and socially responsible. This implies that they could become autonomous and possibly gain improved self-esteem and improve in their ability to possess self-control and maintain a positive mood.

Providing comprehensive efforts and programmes to assist educators and parents to acquire effective parenting skills

Adolescents in this research project experienced the need for effective parenting skills by their caretakers as crucial in their lives. They held the belief that some educators and parents were unable to provide proper guidance for children. Various reasons were stated for lack of caring. Substance abuse and poor parenting skills, such as the practice of favouritism, led to ill feelings amongst siblings. During group interviews one adolescent disclosed that he was not treated equally:

> Learner 22: *'We are five children … you will find that when it comes to allocations of tasks, I am given the hardest …'*
>
> (Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 22, Mafikeng, May 2009).

Participants in this study cited parental and educational neglect, irresponsibility, cruelty and communication influenced by substance and other forms of abuses as unacceptable interactive patterns and matters of concern for them (Nelson *et al.* 2002:181–188). A further concern was the fact that some parents hardly ever came to school for parent meetings or when called about their children's misbehaviours

and poor academic performance. Another concern for them was that some parents used quarrels and fights as way to discipline their children. Affonso *et al.* (2010:147) suggest that in certain families role models include even relatives who are criminals. In this case, children learn antisocial inclinations (Affonso *et al.* 2010:149).

In this regard, one adolescent wrote the following:

Learner 21: '*as a product of abuse at home … I have always been sensitive to bullying at school … it has made me aggressive as bullies … when I am pushed around … it makes me take abuse to the next level … I am not capable to do what bullies do … I experienced much more violence … our parents infect us … black people are shy to show their tender emotions … but most show how harsh they can be.*'

Another said:

Learner 24: '*We live in the days when corporal punishment has been cancelled … no replacement substituted where it was, teachers have no way to discipline learners … such they turn to fury … expelling, suspending and sending learners away…*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learners, Mafikeng, May 2009)

Adolescents in this study said that they needed guidance from their own parents and educators through them showing concern. One adolescent had this to say: '*our parents do not guide us … our parents why? Because charity begins at home.*' He went on to add:

Learner 23: '*let us just wonder … If I am taught my teacher is my parent … I should give him respect like my father and mother … another simple mistake that you do is … when there is a parent meeting, parents just sit at home not going to hear about children's progress … problems … about discipline … the only solution to this is for you the parent to come to school and see for yourself.*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 23, Mafikeng, May 2009)

Another suggestion from a focus group was that parents should be able to guide their children, particularly during the adolescent years. Family involvement is also recommended by McAdams and Lambie (2003: 1–11). Moshome (2001: 58–60) states that family is regarded as a stronghold for its members, and above all a permanent source of life. Adolescents in the present study said that those parents not willing to listen should be taken to court.

Smith (2000:301) conceives that it is necessary for society to remain on high alert for violation of children's rights. In the present study adolescents held that:

Learner 24: '*Teachers and parents, even poor ones, can gain the capacity to observe changes in the child's behaviour so that they can increase their communication … talk with them … this will give children opportunities to express their difficulties.*'

(Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 24, Mafikeng, May 2009)

Accordingly, families need to be taught problem-solving skills and how to deal with crisis situations as opposed to using harmful behaviours.

Ford (1995:2–5) states that educators and parents need to be empowered in such a way that they are able to influence children by referring, for example, to positive role models in the family or community. Families could also be encouraged to use resources such as peer group activities and community service organisations of their own choice (Dwivedi & Gupta 2000:76–80). Information on life skills training which includes guidance on how to practice consistency, warmth, guidance and the ability to acknowledge the child's efforts and struggle, could be beneficial for both teachers and parents (Shaffer 2002:623).

Theme two: Enforcing a secure teaching and learning environment in order to facilitate physical, psychological, social and spiritual well-being of teachers and learners as a way of addressing violence in semi-rural secondary schools

Securing a safe teaching and learning environment is a preventative measure against violence in the school and is inseparable from the promotion of responsible communication. Adolescents regarded a safe learning and teaching environment as a primary need, and thus suggested rigid punitive measures. Paramount in their concerns was their belief that gangs operating in the community and within the school environment, as well as those learners who have already experienced prison life were major threats to a secure school environment. In one group consisting of female learners their need for security was evident in their use of whispers and constant checking of the windows when discussing gangsters in their school.

Learners believed that broad-based approaches can become effective in reducing violence in their schools. Some of their recommendations included the deployment of all community resources in particular departments such as law enforcement, education and health, community forums, parents, the Learner Representative Council (LRC), the School Governing Body (SGB), non-profit organisations and the church. Violence in schools is held to be the responsibility of the whole community.

Dwivedi and Gupta's research (2000:77) proves that the school has great potential to assist adolescents, based on the fact that it has access to the majority of children and that children spend more time at school than in any other environment. In this case, the school has a bigger legal and ethical responsibility in protecting the children in their care, as opposed to other community organisations. The adolescents' views on enforcing a secure teaching learning environment in order to facilitate physical, psychological, social and spiritual well-being included the following two categories: encouraging behavioural and attitudinal change guided by school codes of conduct, and providing firm security.

Encouraging behavioural and attitudinal change guided by school codes of conduct

Adolescents believed that a peaceful and safe environment was possible, provided there was adherence to enforcement

and maintenance of strict discipline through existing classroom and school codes of conduct. These measures should apply to educators as well as learners. Adherence to rules is valued by adolescents, to the extent that they respect even basic rules such as wearing of school uniform and punctuality. A warning from one learner was the following:

> Learner 18: *'if they don't overcome violence there will be more troubles and fights in the school … if they don't obey rules … they punish them or go home and bring their parents … and decide what can be done.'*
>
> (Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 18, Mafikeng, May 2009)

For other learners, rules enshrined in the school's existing code of conduct may need to be revised in order for them to be effective. Ayers, Dohrn and Ayers (2001:1–9) argue that zero-tolerance policies do not have a therapeutic component but rather promote isolation of the learner, and that disciplinary measures and policies should above all else be considered to be fair by everyone. Thus they should bear the capacity to bring forth positive relationships between educators and learners.

It seems that the radical approaches suggested by adolescents in this research project could be counter-effective. For example, one adolescent suggested a step-by-step formula which states '*… if no change … suspend, if no change when they come back … call the police*' (Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 17, Mafikeng, May 2009). In her view these measures were necessary to protect other learners from copying these misbehaviours. Similar forceful and punitive strategies were also suggested for educators, such as salaries being withheld or the educator being imprisoned. Another suggestion was that heads of schools who fail to record and report undesirable incidents at their school should be reported to the LRC, SGB, police and Department of Education. According to Mullin-Rindler (2003:13), it would be better still if supervision could be improved and derogatory utterances reduced.

Providing firm security

The adolescents proposed firm security in the school in order to promote a drug- and weapon-free environment and also to bring a halt to involvement in gang activity in the school. Importantly, they suggested that learners should be on high alert and learn to report each and every incident of violence observed or experienced at school. '*Even one's friends must be reported,*' (Mosome, Connie. Interview with learner 11, Mafikeng, April 2009) plus one learner said. The following are suggestions that the participants made in order to ensure firm security in their school environment: violence should be spoken about to create awareness of its contribution to challenges to mental health in South African society; the Department of Education should be involved so that direct contact can be secured about matters of concern; rules should be strict in secondary schools to reduce regular occurrences of violence; there should be regular police inspection of everyone's bags to prohibit weapons like guns, knives, hosepipes, sticks, nail-clippers, screwdrivers, razor blades, radio aerials and chains from entering in the school;

unexpected raids should be conducted as perpetrators of violence are inclined to bunk from school when learners are pre-warned; extra security needs to be ensured by utilising educators, security and prefects during breaks to protect learners from violent learners and criminal activities; violent learners should be imprisoned as they should realise the consequences of violence; police should visit secondary schools regularly to teach students about violence and its consequences; school debates and competitions on violence should take place at provincial level to encourage learners to know more about violence; and school transportation systems should be improved to protect learners from being raped by gangsters.

Limitations of the study

A purposive sample was drawn from the Mafikeng community, which adds to the originality of the study as this is the first of its kind in this particular community. Yet the research findings might only be contextualised in this specific community's culture and might vary slightly across different semi-rural communities. The participants expressed their feelings in English, which is not their first language, and this might have hampered accurate description of their feelings and thoughts.

Recommendations

This study aimed to explore possible solutions for violence in a semi-rural secondary school setting, as suggested by adolescents, in order to find feasible solutions to enforce in order to reduce occurrences of violence in the specified setting. Two recommendations need to be implemented:

- Firstly, responsible communication in the school environment should be promoted in order to build healthy relationships between learners and educators. This includes fostering a trusting relationship between learners and educators, promoting opportunities for learners and educators to acquire essential interpersonal skills, reinstating socially appropriate boundaries between learners and educators, facilitating and mobilising educators' and learners' resources in order to enable them to become conscious about the needs of others, and providing comprehensive efforts and programmes to assist educators and parents to acquire parenting skills. This is in line with the guideline suggested by Myburgh and Poggenpoel (2009:457), namely facilitating healthy interpersonal skills by mastering such skills, building and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, managing conflict and mastering assertive behaviour.
- Secondly, a secure teaching learning environment should be enforced in order to facilitate the physical, psychological, social and spiritual well-being of educators and learners. This includes encouraging behavioural and attitudinal change guided by school codes of conduct and providing firm security. Myburgh and Poggenpoel (2009:457) refer to this as facilitation of healthy environmental relationships through engaging in planned, thoughtful activity, organising the environment and managing change. Dawes and Ward (2011:3) also emphasise the importance

of training teachers in effective classroom management skills and learners in conflict management skills.

More studies of this nature should be conducted in different semi-rural areas to find global solutions which might prove successful. Future studies can also focus on the opinions of educators, parents and other community members to reduce the problem of violence in semi-rural secondary schools.

Conclusion

This study possibly represented a long-awaited chance for the participants to express deep-seated fears, discouragements, frustrations and anxieties. They were small in number, and certainly there are many more community members who could provide a broader view on how violence in the schools could be curbed. It seems that therapeutic educators and families as well as a secure teaching and learning environment can bring a positive change. Professionals, educators, churches and all authorities should cooperate to protect children and to ensure that the education they receive is effective in promoting acceptable human values.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this paper.

Authors' contributions

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