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Editorial: Schools as enabling environments

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Children and youth need safe and supportive schools if they are to succeed in school, to develop in a healthy manner, and to thrive. These needs are particularly great for children who are vulnerable, namely those who struggle with trauma, the adversities of poverty, and the challenges of racism, ethnocentrism, religious prejudice, and disability. Although disruptive encounters where students feel unsafe may evoke learning for some students, others succumb to them, whether due to genetic based sensitivity (Belsky & Pleuss, 2009), allostatic load (McEwen, 1998), or lack of social support (Masten, 2014). Schools can keep students safe by providing a supportive, respectful, and a caring environment, where students are both secure from physical harm and emotional toxicities (such as bullying, and prejudice), and nourished by community connections to caring teachers and students (Osher, Dwyer, Jimerson & Brown, 2012; Osher, Woodruff & Sims, 2002; Shonkoff, Garner, The Committee on psychosocial aspects of child and family health, The Committee on early childhood, adoption, and dependent care & The Section on developmental and behavioural pediatrics, 2012).

Schools are important settings for development, and there are school effects both on well-being, and on ill-being (Osher, Kendziora, Spier & Garibaldi, 2014). Effective schools create strong conditions for learning, where students feel and are physically and emotionally safe; connected to and supported by their teachers and the school; challenged by expectations and are engaged in learning; and where their peers and the adults in the school practice good social and emotional skills (Osher, Dwyer & Jackson, 2004). Safety is a necessary but not sufficient condition for learning. However, research suggests that safety is associated with test performance, and that this relationship helps explain association that are found between poverty and poor school performance (Osher & Kendziora, 2010; Osher, Poirier, Jarjoura, Brown & Kendziora (In press); Windham, Kendziora, Brown, Osher & Song, 2009).

Like other conditions for learning, safety is experienced individually in the moment when individuals confront other individuals or groups and contextually, in situations that place them at risk and when they feel threatened, anxious, vulnerable, or exposed. A person's body responds, they secrete stress hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol, their heart rate changes, their amygdalas kick in and they may experience a fight or flight impulse in response to risk, and in some cases, they may develop unproductive and physically unhealthy allostatic stress, as their neurobiology adjusts to that which threatens it. Lack of safety can also go unperceived, while still posing and contributing to short and long term risks and impacts. Safety, and danger, are often transactional as individuals evoke and reinforce healthy and unhealthy behaviours in each other.

When children and youth feel physically threatened, their defensive responses, whether skipping or dropping out of school; carrying weapons; acting tough; showing up late; or tuning out in class, impede learning. When students feel emotionally unsafe, they may also avoid school and drop out or exhibit avoidance behaviours and fail to participate in class. Safety is affected by the school environment, as well as by the physical and social environments in which the school is nested. It is also affected by the individual and collective social emotional competencies of students and staff, whose behaviours and interactions affect one another. For example, students who can self-regulate are more able to avoid doing things that put themselves and others at risk. Similarly, students who have good relational skills and make accurate attributions of other's desires and intentions may be able to avoid fights (Osher, Sprague, Weissberg, Axelrod, Keenan, Kendziora & Zins, 2008). Finally school teachers who are self-aware and able to manage their stress will be more able to address behavioural problems in a way that does not exacerbate them (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Osher et al., 2012).

Safety includes both actual and perceived risk. The perception of safety may be experienced differently by different students and staff. This differential experience, is, in turn, a function of how vulnerable students or staff are, for example whether they have previously been victimised or experienced trauma, have an anxiety disorder, or are currently experiencing trauma. The differential experience of safety is also affected by the extent to which individuals are and experience themselves as a member of the school community.

School Safety can be conceptualised as having three components, namely: physical safety, emotional safety, and intellectual safety (Osher & Kendziora, 2010). Each of these forms of safety are complex, where each involves the presence of beneficial factors as well as the absence of those factors that place one at risk. Physical safety involves all aspects of physical wellbeing, including access to the sustenance (food, water, and sleep) that support the bodies' functioning, as well as the lack of exposure to physical aggression and environmental hazards. Emotional safety includes the feeling of belonging and connection, as well as feeling free from embarrassment, sarcasm, teasing, harassment, relational bullying, stigmatisation, and other forms of

humiliation. Intellectual safety includes feeling comfortable taking academic risks and expressing oneself as well as the perception and reality of a low response cost for failure.

When students feel safe, it is easier for them to be at ease; to concentrate; to be analytical; to be creative and reflective; to respond to others responsibly; and to take appropriate academic risks. When students and teachers feel unsafe, their biological response to the perception of threat compromises their ability to attend to and process information. Their body's response to perceived and real threats to their life, person, or basic sense of safety, affects their emotional regulation, cognition, and their ability to establish positive social relationships as well as their physical health (through allostatic stress). These biological and social-emotional factors are critical to school success. This is particularly the case, when trauma is chronic, and experienced early in life (Cook, Spinazzola, Ford, Lanktree, Blaustein, Cloitre, DeRosa, Hubbard, Kagan, Liataud, Mallah, Olafson & Van der Kolk, 2005; D'Andrea, Ford, Stolbach, Spinazzola & Van der Kolk, 2012; Evans, Li & Whipple, 2013; Kaplow, Saxe, Putnam, Pynoos & Lieberman, 2006; McEwen, 1998; Perry & Pollard, 1998).

Although the need for safety and the body's response to threat is a universal human phenomenon, the risk of being in an unsafe environment is 'unequally distributed' (Osher, 1998). Not only is risk socially constructed and distributed, but so is access to the support mechanisms that can help individuals address the impact of physically unsafe environments. Poverty and racism expose young people to greater risk factors including micro-aggressions (Huynh, 2012), in many, if not all countries. These same factors can compromise the ability of adults to provide support that can buffer the effects of trauma. For example, parents may be stressed by economic concerns, or they may be forced to take jobs that interfere with their ability to be physically present when their children are in particular need of support (Kwon & Wickrama, 2014). Similarly, racism may lead to the incarceration of children's parents or, through implicit bias, may affect access to treatment.

Because it is socially constructed, safety is malleable, particularly in the self-contained environment of the school community. The United States (U.S.) provides some examples and analyses of both what can be done, and what should not be done in order to keep schools safe. After a spate of infamous school shootings in the late 1990s, President William Clinton and the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice convened an expert panel on the subject of school safety, and distributed to every U.S. school research-based guides that called for the creation of caring schools; where every student is connected to adults in the school, and students who have the need, receive preventative ser-

vices, such as counselling early, to intercept problems before they occur (Dwyer & Osher, 2000; Dwyer, Osher & Warger, 1998). Congress and the U.S. Department of Education followed on from these documents with large grant programmes that coordinated services (The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program), and supported the use of surveys of students and other concerned parties regarding school climate, in order to proactively tailor interventions (Safe, Supportive, and Successful Schools Program). Schools that employed these principles became safer by strengthening the connections between all members of the school community, and by providing inclusive support, rather than excluding and punishing students who needed additional services such as counselling (Osher, Sandler & Nelson, 2001; Quinn, Osher, Hoffman & Hanley, 1998). There has also been an increasing body of intervention and services research regarding universal approaches that implement community building, social emotional learning, and positive behavioural supports; as well as research concerned with how to tailor services to respond to needs created by trauma, emotional, mental, and behavioural problems, and student disengagement.

While some schools implemented the logic of these guides and leveraged the Federal programmes, others responded by ratcheting up externally-imposed discipline, enforced by police and security personnel. This reactive approach reflected three factors: a punitive mind-set that rejected research demonstrating the ineffectiveness of reactive and punitive approaches (Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010); the lack of staff and school capacity to address the needs of students who had experienced the adversities of poverty and trauma; and implicit racial bias, which created profound disparities in terms of who experienced exclusionary discipline (Osher et al., 2012). Black students were much more likely to attend schools with harsh discipline policies, and even when they did not attend such schools, they were more likely to receive corporal punishment, move in and out of school suspension, and undergo expulsion and/or referral to the police. While these policies in some limited instances improved safety and academic achievements for some students, they were consequential for those who were disciplined, resulting in diminished opportunities to learn, academic problems, and drop out; all of which contributed to the formulation of a '*pipeline to prison*', particularly for African American students. The consequences of these problems resulting from systemic reactivity have been extensively documented, and have led to public and private efforts to reduce exclusionary discipline and the relation this has to time in prison, and to foster supportive school discipline and pathways to post-secondary success (Losen, 2011; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Teske, 2011).

Safety and inclusivity have also been the focus of the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) Child Friendly Schools (CFS), both in South Africa and in the many low and middle income countries where UNICEF works with ministries of education. A global evaluation of CFS, which involved site visits and the collection of survey and interview data from students, faculty, and school heads in The Philippines, Thailand, Guyana, Nicaragua, Nigeria, and South Africa, found that CFS schools were making headway in creating safe, inclusive, and child-centered learning environments, which helped realise the goals of the International Declaration on the Rights of Children. Less progress was found in South Africa, where 65 percent of students gave ratings that suggested that schools needed improvement in terms of establishing a safe and inclusive environment, as opposed to between 41 and 46 percent in Thailand, Guyana, and Nigeria; 24 percent in Nicaragua; and 19 percent in the Philippines. These findings were consistent with the research team's observations of both the school and classroom environment (Osher, Kelly, Tolani-Brown, Shors & Chen, 2009; Osher, Spier, Kelly, Tolani-Brown, Shors, Chen, Jessee, Padilla, Caceres & Davis, 2009).

In South Africa, the phenomenon of School Safety has been studied extensively over the past ten years, although there are no major research surveys on the subject. Most available studies have been conducted in the form of a small scale survey, and case studies. This interest in School Safety emanates from scores of incidences of crime, theft, drug abuse and sexual harassment that have been recorded in print as well as radio and television media. More and more South African schools have become unsafe places to live in, especially those located in black residential areas (Mabasa, 2013; Masitsa, 2011; Prinsloo, 2005).

Several initiatives to curb the deteriorating state of school have been attempted, without success. Two such initiatives are the Safe Schools Programme and CFS, mentioned above. Thousands of rands have been spent on these programmes, and others, without significant tangible results. Little by little, policy makers are beginning to recognise the value of evidence-based research in addressing the problem of safety in schools if quality education is to be realised. The papers for this Special Issue were developed in this context (Prinsloo, 2005).

The five papers included here sought to understand this phenomenon by invoking evidence-based research to support their claims. In the next section, we explore the methodologies that were followed.

Methodological Considerations

This introduction presents some of the methodological issues that emerged in the course of the review of this Special Issue. We first present our per-

spective on the methodological rationale for this important work. We summarise each of the five papers, including the design of their research. Finally, we assess the collective implications of these papers both substantively and methodologically. Any study rests on the intentional use of a right method, and an awareness of both its strengths and limitations. Where this principle is neglected or compromised, plodding industry and brilliant genius are equally doomed to failure.

Methodological insight is central to the scientific publication. In the first place, it is important that the scientific inquiry should be based on sound analysis and interpretation, inferences and refutations or agreements. Thereafter, it is important that facts and ideas be substantiated from established disciplines, field of study, and/or theoretical frameworks.

Our sense of this collection on School Safety is that, from among the pool of submissions, the studies represented here are rigorous, particularly after the authors responded to the anonymous feedback of a South African and non-South African reviewer. The majority of the authors in this Special Issue used social theories to develop the criteria of trustworthiness, which expand the conceptualisation of validity and reliability in the quantitative tradition (Bitsch, 2005). They afforded participants the space to express themselves regarding the way in which they understood the frame of the Special Issue, which is concerned with how to create safe and supportive schools that provide quality education, and how higher education institutions could contribute to this goal.

All the papers but one used qualitative methodologies of inquiry to address the subject of safety in schools. This is not a surprise, as the phenomenon School Safety is deeply rooted in social interactions. Thus, qualitative inquiry was broadly the most suitable approach, given the nature of the problems addressed. Moolla and Lazarus discuss the collaboration between school psychologists and other school stakeholders in making schools enabling and supportive environments. They put the issue of trust in schools as an important matter as they emphasize the social capital of school psychologists in the intersectoral collaboration. Their research was framed within the constructivist interpretative paradigm, which allowed the participants to construct and interpret their multiple subjective realities. The use of focus group interviews was helpful in addressing the research question, as it allowed the researchers space to explore the subjective thoughts and feelings – and not just the behaviour – of the participants.

Modipane and Themane focus on teachers' social capital as a resource for curriculum development. The paper argues for the importance of the willingness, ability and readiness of teachers as critical to implementing new curriculum develop-

ment initiatives. The researchers examined teachers' social capital in the implementation of child-friendly approaches and principles in creating safe and supportive school environments. To capture the experiences of teachers, they used a phenomenological research design. This allowed the teachers in their study to present their experiences from an insider perspective. Using the notion of social capital, their paper demonstrates the power of allowing teachers to express themselves as agents of curriculum change. This paper adds an important dimension in understanding School Safety from a curriculum perspective. The authors are appropriately cautious in accepting the findings as applicable to all contexts. They have shown that despite thorough analysis and interpretation of the findings, we ought to be careful not to generalise from just a few cases.

Gachago, Condy, Ivala and Chigona relate the power of digital storytelling to highlight how social justice education can be taught to students. Their study followed a narrative inquiry research approach. The authors note the value of this method by pointing to the fact that stories provide a platform to express oneself, and function to bring meaning to human experience. Matlala, Nolte and Temane also followed a qualitative research approach to highlight the experiences of secondary school teachers when teaching pregnant learners. They used an exploratory descriptive research design to understand the meanings, interpretations and subjective experiences of students from impoverished families. The paper highlights the challenges that pregnant learners and their teachers face in their discussion of the multi-faceted and rhizomatic nature of School Safety. These two papers also underscore the potential of constructing knowledge inductively by collecting and analyzing narratives from the participants themselves. Although they used theory or literature to make sense of their data, the authors have highlighted the value of recognising the contribution of knowledge creation from the participants themselves. For example, the experience of teachers who teach pregnant learners provides a unique perspective that can best be expressed by those directly involved in a situation of this kind.

Only Mampane's research followed a quantitative inquiry to examine factors contributing to the resilience of middle-adolescents in a South African township. The author used factor analyses of a small-scale survey administered to a purposive sample, following a descriptive design, to examine the causes of resilient behaviour. The paper, which is consistent with international research on resilience, suggests that some middle-adolescent students can overcome adversities due to protective individual and contextual factors (Masten, 2014).

These papers have underscored the importance of incorporating the views of their partici-

pants into the study of a social phenomenon such as School Safety. They also illustrate that studying a social phenomenon such as School Safety should not be based on popular belief or on an unsubstantiated claim by a group or an individual. Rather, it requires a rigorous systematic and sustained inquiry carried out to answer certain research questions (Waghid, 2013). This also requires educational research that adheres to methodological rigour through a sustained inquiry that is characterised by comprehensiveness and representativeness of information collected thoroughly, accurately, and carefully (Waghid, 2013).

The authors have used theory mainly as a lens, rather than as a form of paradigm or knowledge generation. They used different theoretical models to analyse a vast spectrum of emerging issues of School Safety in South Africa. This collection of papers shifts from a traditional focus, which tends to concentrate on School Safety in isolation of other social processes. Instead, the contributors move towards a multi-disciplinary examination that questions other social institutions and processes that mediate our understanding of School Safety. The paper by Modipane and Themane on understanding the teachers' social capital as a resource and the paper by Moolla and Lazarus on the role of school psychologists in making schools work both illustrate that when teachers collaborate among themselves, and with other stakeholders within the school, better results in school development are achieved. Hopefully these papers will contribute to the study and implementation of such collaborations and underscore that doing this will enhance learning and civic outcomes for South Africa's children and youth.

These five papers are largely descriptive, and often have small sample sizes. However, they raise important issues and offer hypotheses that are relevant to South Africa as well as to international studies that focus on safety, resilience, and well being - particularly as they provide access to the perceptions of South African youth and adults. These papers propose hypotheses that can be elaborated upon by additional descriptive studies and confirmed or refined by well designed cross sectional studies of South African data as well as by rigorous quasi-experimental and experimental studies that apply mixed methods. These subsequent studies should, in the spirit of the articles in this Special Issue, maintain the voice of South African youth and adults by involving them in the design, analysis, and dissemination of these empirical studies. Doing this will require both financial resources and as well as a break from some approaches to rigorous research that fail to address ecological validity. Doing this can provide a strong base for policy and, when cost data are collected, a firm platform for benefit-cost analyses. Stakeholder involvement in empirical research can

also provide more valid and reliable knowledge because empirical inferences can be evaluated and nuanced by stakeholder knowledge.

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