Teachers' perspectives about learners' fights: Implications for school Leadership

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Abstract: Violence is a global problem. Thousands of people worldwide die daily because of various intentional acts of violence such as collective, interpersonal, and self-directed violence. In South Africa, school violence is escalating. Learner fights are also reportedly increasing in frequency and gravity. In this paper, the researcher reports on the findings of a qualitative study of learner fights in two South African high schools, and the leadership implications thereof. Twelve teachers and two principals were purposely selected and interviewed. The participants perceived learner fights as a complicated phenomenon, especially made complex by the diversity of fight types, fight causes, fights locations within the schools, and the onlookers' reactions. Notwithstanding responsive management endeavours attempted in the two schools, fights among learners were reported to occur and recur often. The paper contends that there is a need to create an enabling environment where teachers and learners can exercise leadership to dispel learner fights.

Keywords: Discipline, fights, leadership, social control, violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Schools play an essential role in socialising and preparing learners for the future. In this way, teachers can influence learners to avoid violence in general and learner fights (Gever & Flisher, 2012). In this paper, teachers are considered as leaders because they are expected to exercise leadership in line with the mandate of the Norms and Standards for Educators, as stipulated in the Education Policy Act (No. 27) of 1996 (South African Department of Education, 2000).

Leadership is of paramount importance for the successful functioning of a school (Marzano, Waters & Mcnuity, 2005). As leaders, teachers should have a vision and potential to enthuse and motivate others (Coleman, 2005). To understand the meanings attached to learner fights by teachers as leaders, the paper adopted Werner's (2011) leadership notion that views leadership as a social process in which people are influenced to work enthusiastically towards achieving organisational goals. Werner further argues that this process is not restricted to formal authority. Even those without formal positions in an organisation can influence others. In this way, teachers with formal positions and those without such positions can exercise leadership to address learner fights. Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) opine that leadership as influence can be exerted for decision-making, persuasion, change and the accomplishment of goals. The paper is cognisant that fighting is a form of violence, hence the constant reference to violence in this paper, to portray the nature of the problem of learner fights. This paper uses the term "teacher" to refer to principals and teachers without formal positions of authority. Nevertheless, the findings section of the current paper presents verbatim quotes from both groups of participants in keeping with the principles of distributed leadership where leadership is not a sole preserve of positional leaders.

Violence is a world-wide concern (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), throughout the world, thousands of people die every day because of various intentional acts of violence such as collective, interpersonal, and self-directed violence (WHO, 2002). The persistence of school violence and its negative impact undermines international initiatives such as the United Nations' agenda for 2030. Goal 16 of sustainable development goals mandates of the UN 's member states, including South Africa, is to "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development"; thereby ensuring that everyone should be free from all forms of violence. In the United States of America (USA), for example, general school violence and learner fights are worrying problems (Sattler, Thomas & Cadet, 2016). A study by Sattler et al found that fear was one of the risk factors associated with learner aggression. Learners who feared being victimised were more prone to engage in fights. For example, some learners carried weapons while others became aggressive for defensive purposes. Hong, Merrin, Peguero, Gonzalez-Prendes and Lee (2016) found that learners from immigrant families in the USA were exposed to multiple socio-ecological risk factors that contributed to their aggressive behaviours.

South Africa is one of the countries that experience high level of violence (Harber, 2004). Similarly, most South African schools have been identified as unsafe due to widespread violence (SACE, 2011; Burton & Leoschut, 2013). School violence undermines learners' right to education (Taole, 2016). Violence in South African schools is escalating (Botha, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2012). It is even more

worrying that, in South African schools, is a shift from bullying to forms of violence that are more serious, such as aggression (Mestry, 2015). Fighting is common among learners. In the past, fights were considered normal behaviour for adolescents on playgrounds. However, the increasing frequency of fights warrants the attention of researchers (Burton, 2008). Fights among learners may have negative consequences, including serious injuries, dropping out of school (Acquah, Lloyd, Davids & Wilson, 2014), learner absenteeism, and disruption of learning processes (Khuzwayo, Taylor & Connolly, 2016).

A look at some online media platforms provides a vivid picture of the gravity of fights in South African schools. Headlines on some of these platforms read: "I did not send him to the school to be killed – Mother of a slain boy" (Myambo, 2016). "Pupil stabbed during fight at school" (Khoza, 2016), "Grade 11 learner stabbed at CT school" (Isaacs, 2016), "KZN [KwaZulu-Natal] pupil killed in suspected gang fight at school" (Wicks, 2015), "Pupil killed, 5 injured in KZN school stabbing rampage" (Wicks, 2016). These headlines explain why learner fights in South African schools have turned out to be a serious concern that merits the attention of researchers and society.

Learners fight for several reasons such as disagreements, teasing, bumping into another learner carelessly, taking another learner's property without permission (Burton, 2008). Mncube and Harber (2012) found that learners might fight in response to provocation and because of the desire for revenge. Such fights may also be fueled by disputes emanating either from within or outside schools. Van der Westhuizen and Maree (2009) found that learners who are exposed to violence at home often resort to violence in solving misunderstandings at school. From a gender perspective, Taole (2016) contends that girls who fight

defy the stereotypical view that positions girls as victims of violence as opposed to perpetrators, and thus, demonstrates that women cannot all be painted with the same brush. It thus appears that both girls and boys can engage in fights.

Various stakeholders, including parents, teachers and school managers have the potential of creating a violence-free environment where learners can feel safe (Tugli, 2015). Such potential can be harnessed through working together in addressing the scourge of school of learner fights (Mestry, 2015). Astor, Benbenishty and Estrada (2009) emphasise the essence of principals' leadership in tackling school violence. However, in the twenty-first century, the principals should co-lead the schools with other teachers (Townsend, 2011). This is more so in the case of addressing learner fights because it is a multifaceted and complex issue. Other scholars rank leadership after classroom practice in relation to its impact and importance in schools (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010). As indicated above, this paper argues that leadership is a process of influence that principals and other teachers can exercise. There appears to be limited knowledge about teachers' perspectives about learner fights. This paper therefore intends to contribute to knowledge in that regard. Such knowledge will likely inform practice about how schools can address learner fights. The findings from this paper also have the potential to inform policy, since policy makers can formulate appropriate policies better if they are aware of the nature, causes and challenges regarding learner fights. The paper is guided by the following questions:

- What are the teachers' perspectives of learner fights?
- How do teachers respond to learner fights?
- What are the leadership implications of teachers'

perspectives about learner fights?

Theoretical framework

A three-pronged theoretical framework underpins this paper: Hirsch's social control theory, Bandura's social learning theory and distributed leadership theory.

The social control theory explains why individuals adhere to law and societal rules (Pittaro, 2007). Four elements characterise it: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Pittaro, 2007; Amaraphibal, Rujipak & Payakkakom, 2013). These elements serve as a bond between an individual and society, thereby discouraging violent behaviour while encouraging conformity to acceptable behaviour (Petrocelli & Petrocelli, 2005). Learners are likely to engage in a fight when the bonds with institutions such as the family, school and community are weakened (Pittaro, 2007).

Bandura's (1997) social learning theory highlights the essence of observation and modeling in people's social relations. Learning occurs through modeling in four phases: attentional, retention, reproduction, and motivational (Slavian, 2009). It is argued that through the attention stages, people pay attention to the behaviour displayed by those with which they associate and later imitate the learnt behaviour. In this way learners may imitate the aggressive behaviour of those with which they associate (Bandura, 1997). However, learners do not imitate every model, not every model or the person they observe (Eysenek, 2003). Since this paper is also concerned with school leadership, the researcher adopted the distributed leadership theory to discuss the implications of school leadership with regard to how teachers constructed learner fights and their responses to such fights. According to Spillane (2005), distributed leadership is based on the notion of shared leadership where leadership is dispersed throughout the organisation. In the school context, distributed leadership comes to the fore when the principal, other teachers and learners carry out leadership roles. From this leadership perspective, the researcher discussed the implications of leadership regarding learner fights in the participant schools.

METHODS

Since the paper sought to understand teachers' construction of learner fights, the researcher adopted the qualitative research approach in line with Creswell's (2007) argument that the qualitative approach allows the researchers to understand and explain an issue in detail. The study was conducted in two South African schools. Informed by a pilot study that sought to identify schools experiencing high levels of violence in a selected Ward, the researcher purposively established the two schools. In conformity with ethical principles, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to these schools, namely: Ten high school and Mic high school. Both schools were no-fee schools because they were in poverty-stricken communities.

The researcher purposively selected 14 participants who were deemed knowledgeable about the research topic. They consisted of a principal and six teachers from each school. The teaching experience of the selected teachers was more than five years; hence, their rich knowledge about learner fight incidents. To protect their identities, the participants were assigned pseudonyms. The principals of Ten high school and Mic high school were referred to as Themba and Max respectively. The researcher assigned the Ten high school teachers the pseudonyms: T1, T 2, T 3, T 4, T5 and T6. Those at Mic high school were named: TA, TB, TC, T D, T E and TF.

Individual interviews were held with each participant.

Cognisant of the complexities of qualitative data analysis, a spiral data analysis strategy was used, as suggested by (Creswell,2007; Leedy & Ormrod,2010). This strategy involves the following step: organisation of data, perusal of entire data, classification of data and synthesising data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Ethical issues were adhered to. Before generating data, The South African Department of Education granted permission. The principals of the two participant schools also permitted the study. Informed consent was also obtained from the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this section are in line with the themes that emerged from the data. Two main themes were identified: namely teachers' perspectives about learner fights and teachers' responses to learner fights.

Teachers' perspectives about learner fights
The teachers and principals' perceived learner fights to constitute the following: types of fights, causes of fights among learners, popular places where fights occurred and fights as entertainment.

Types of fights.
The participants indicated that fights between two learners occurred often in the two schools. However, gang fights were also reported in Ten high school.

Fights between two learners
Fighting between learners across genders was reported as a common occurrence at Ten high school. In relation to learner fights, the principal of Ten high school said:
"As I said, learners fight a lot in this school. Girls also do fight one another. Sometimes a boy fights against a girl and sometimes a girl fights against another girl" (Themba).

One Ten high school teacher made a comparative analysis of fights among girls and boys: "More fights occur among boys. Girls fight though their fights are not violent" (T1).

Learner fights often occurred at Ten high school across sexes. It showed that misconceptions among learners were regularly dealt with through fights. Like his Ten high school counterpart, the principal of Mic high school also reported that fights among learners happened irrespective of sex:

There is also physical violence where you find that boys end up fighting. Sometimes girls also fight because of differences. Sometimes it is a boy against a girl or a boy against another boy or a girl against a girl (Max).

While at Ten high school it was reported that more fights occurred among boys than among girls, a teacher from Mic high school indicated that more fights happened among girls in the school:

"Girls have fights as well. In fact, the fights are between girls most of the time. The fights which happen in this school may be a girl and a girl, a boy and a boy or a boy and a girl" (A).

It also emerged that some Mic high school learners had used weapons during fights while others brought dangerous weapons that the teachers confiscated before they could be used: "Some learners brought into the school weapons such as knives and even homemade guns. However, they never used these weapons" (TB).

Contrary to the view by TB that knives had never been used at Mic high school, another teacher from the school referred to a case where one learner stabbed and killed another:

"One boy was bullied at school by another boy. The victim ran away from the school. The following day early in the morning, the victim waited for the bully on the road carrying a knife and

when the bully arrived, this boy stabbed him". (TC).

Learner fights at Mic high school were more vicious than those at Ten high school. The carrying of dangerous weapons, for example, knives and homemade firearms by some Mic high school learners, exhibited the gravity of the intended rough nature of fights. Although it was a once-off incident, the murder of one Mic high school learner by another during a learner fight demonstrates that some learners carried weapons to use on others. Consistent with the findings of previous studies (Burton, 2008; Mestry, 2015), the present study found that the nature of learner fights was severe and required the attention of teachers and principals as school leaders.

Gang fights

It was found that fights among Ten high school learners sometimes occurred among groups. This trend was not reported at Mic high school. On this matter, Themba reported:

Sometimes there are group fights. Learners form groups according to areas where they live and then, groups from different areas fight. The conflict may start between two learners and the involved learners invite others from their groups.

T3 from Ten high school reported an incident of a fight between two gangs where the teachers had to request assistance from the police:

"There was a serious fight between two gangs. It started between two learners and one of them carried a knife. The other learner invited his gang and the one with a knife invited his gang. The two gangs fought. It was dangerous to try to stop the fight. We had to call the police".

There appears to be little belief in school rules and the ability of school managers to resolve violence. Owing to a weak or absence of a belief bond (Pittaro, 2007), some learners tended to have found their peers or gang members as an alternative support structure for their safety and protection.

Causes of fights among learners

The participants identified various factors as the causes of fights among learners. Themba, the Ten high school principal, indicated, "Learners tease and insult each other and do not report their conflicts to the teachers. The fights then start".

A teacher from Ten high school reported that multiple reasons cause fights among learners:

" Various factors contribute to fights among learners.. for example, over girlfriends. The food that the government provides to learners, may be a source of conflicts and fights." (T5).

The principal of Mic high school spoke about the causes of fights among girls saying: "We have lots of fights. Girls fight for different reasons. They fight about boys, gossiping, name calling. They fight about small things like who is popular and who is not".

One of the Mic high school teachers felt that learners were influenced by their backgrounds and the media influenced them:

Some learners are violent because of their background; seeing their parents fighting now and again. When you listen to the news South African news, you hear that people fought someone who was stealing at a house, and he was killed. Learners listen to the news and watch TV. They think what they get from the news is a way of life. Therefore, they like to fight (TD).

The findings suggest that learners fight due to various factors such as conflicts and misunderstandings, which they resolve through fights (Doig, 2005). There also appears to be a link between the violent behavior of the parents at home and the fights among learners at school. This is in line with Bandura's (1977) argument that children 's violent behaviour may result from their

imitation of the parents' violent behaviour observed at home.

Popular places where learners fought.

The participants mentioned specific areas on which learner fights occurred. These include classrooms, corridors and playgrounds. Ten high school principal said: "Learners fight in classrooms in the absence of the teachers or on play grounds".

Contrarily a teacher from the same school reported an incidence where learners fought in the classroom despite the presence of a teacher:

"Learners fight in the classroom. It know a case of learner fights in the presence of one of my colleagues. But my observation is that when a teacher is teaching learners are unlikely to fight,".

The classrooms and playgrounds in Mic high school were also mentioned areas where learners fought. To this effect, the principal of Mic high school reported that: "On playgrounds and along corridors learners do fight".

Sometimes fights started in the classroom and continued outside the classroom. In relation to this, TE reported that one boy from her class fought a girl:

"At one time I was in class when one girl threw a bottle of water at her friend, but the bottle landed on a different learner, so that led to a fight which started outside the classroom. This happens almost every day in this school".

The findings suggest that learner fights occurred in the presence of some teachers and outside the classrooms where an adult did not supervise learners. Social control theory emphasises the importance of involvement and commitment as possible deterrents for learner misbehaviour (Pittaro, 2007; Amaraphibal et al., 2013). It could be deduced that a lack of participation and commitment to classroom activities was a variable that contributed to learner fights in the classrooms.

Fighting as entertainment: Onlookers' reported reactions to fights

The findings from the two schools showed that fights between two or more learners occurred in the presence of other learners. The learners who were onlookers seemed to derive joy in watching others fight. Underscoring the idea of onlookers being entertained by watching fights, one teacher from Ten high school asserted:

"When there is a fight, other learners do not stop the fighters, but they watch them. Those watching enjoy what they see. This is a challenge because it also happens in the community. Members of the community just watch acts of violence and do not do anything about that. People" (T2).

Another teacher participant expressed the view that learner fights entertain onlookers:

"Learners in this school like to fight. Other learners like to watch their peers fighting. When there is a fight, they will shout in excitement encouraging those who fight to continue. They are not interested in stopping the fight. It is like they are watching a movie or TV story that they like" T5.

Similarly, the participants at Mic high school reported that learner fights served as entertainment to onlookers:

"Learners are entertained by watching others fight. When they see others fighting, they cheer on the fighters"TF.

TC from mic high school made a comparison between learners' behavior towards learner fights and the behaviour of the members of the community when there is a fight among some community members:

"Girl learners fight in this school. Fighting among women is also common in the community to which our learners belong. When women fight in the community the onlookers encouraged

them to fight. The onlookers add fuel to the already burning fire".

The findings show that the onlookers found it entertaining to watch other learners fighting. The influence of the community on the learners was pronounced in that the onlookers who cheered the fighters seemed to imitate the onlookers among community members who behave the same when some community members fight.

Teachers' responses to fights

The two schools relied on a learners' Code of Conduct to address learner fights. The principal of Ten high school had this to say:

> "*We* involve parents in resolving learner fights. We invite to the school the parents of learners that fought. The fight incident is recorded in the incident book. The disciplinary committee is responsible for dealing with learner fights and other disciplinary issues".

In relation to the role played by the disciplinary committee, one member of this committee remarked:

> "We issue letters that invite parents of the learners who fought. A disciplinary hearing is held at the school in the presence of the parents. The learners may then be suspended. The learners are required to declare in writing that they will not commit any kind of misconduct again, otherwise they maybe be expelled from the school. If the same learners or one of them repeat misconduct, we escalate the matter to the school governing body (SGB)." (T4).

The principal of Mic high school described the ways in which fights among learners were handled:

In cases where learners fight, we call the concerned learners to the office and ask their parents to come to the school. After a disciplinary hearing, they may be expelled from the school. In certain cases, we encourage the parents to take a transfer to another school other than taking the expulsion route. These cases are handled by me or members of the disciplinary committee. TD from Mic high school talked about learners' fight that occurred while she was teaching:

"I ordered the two learners to the office of the deputy principal. Their parents were invited to the school because fighting is against the school's Code of Conduct; again, the girl was injured. The boy who hit the girl was reprimanded for that".

It was found that such measures as suspension and expulsion of learners were used in the participant schools in to address the challenge of learner fights. Coleman (2005) contends that procedures and structures are given prominence in a managerially led school. In essence, the procedures followed in the two schools in response to learner fights demonstrated that these schools were predominantly managerial led.

The participants from the two schools constructed learner fights as a baffling wonder that was portrayed by the existence of types of learner fights, their multiple causes, and the view that they happened in different areas inside the school. The reactions of learner onlookers to fights additionally aggravated the complex nature of these fights as the said learner onlookers supported the continuity of fights. Interpreted from a social control hypothesis viewpoint, learner fights as offensive and defensive mechanisms showed a debilitated attachment of the concerned learners to their schools. Petrocelli and Petrocelli (2005) contend that attachment is about closeness to one's school and peers. Hong et al. (2016) also found that learners who felt detached from people in their proximity such as parents were at the risk of engaging in fights. The closeness and craving to keep up strong connections could minimise the odds of learners contributing to fights. Fighting likewise showed that the concerned learners had almost no belief in the school

regulations; this sanctioned the fights. The same thing could be said regarding the learner onlookers who did not stop other learner fights, but instead, urged fighters to proceed, adding fuel to the smoldering flame.

Studies conducted in South Africa and elsewhere show a correlation between fear of being victimised (Sattler et al., 2016), provocation, feelings of revenge (Mncube & Harber, 2012), and learner fights. This paper also found that consistent provocative verbal utterances and bullying resulted in learner fights. These fights negatively affected the two schools' main business: teaching and learning (Khuzwayo et al., 2016; Taole, 2016). An extreme case of bullying resulted in the death of one learner. Thus, learner fights had serious repercussions.

A peculiar finding in this paper is that learner fights served as entertainment to onlookers. While learner fights are acknowledged in literature as violence, the onlookers seemed to derive pleasure from watching the fighters. It was likely that those who dominated the fights were directly rewarded and motivated by their peers (Eysenck, 2003). Hamlall and Morrell (2012) observed that peer endorsement plays a vital role for learners to engage in fights.

The teachers' and principals' interpretation of their reaction to learner fights in the participant schools demonstrates that they were inclined to responsive measures and organised little if any, proactive interventions. These receptive measures were frequently exacerbated by filtering disciplinary measures, which are in essence teachers and principals' obligations. This paper contends that the utilisation of only punitive and responsive disciplinary measures in dealing with learner fights in the two schools flagged a lack of leadership. In the next section, I will develop this argument.

School leadership implications are evident from the teachers' and principals' reactions to learner fights. While managing discipline and learner fights is essential, leadership is paramount for change to happen. As Harris (2008) indicated, there is empirical evidence that leadership positively affects change in an organisation. In any case, the teachers from disciplinary committees limited their roles to suspending learners or recommending their expulsion. They did not try to help learners change their attitude towards resolving misunderstandings through fights. The paper argues that leadership was deficient on their part. The principals appeared to abstain from exercising leadership in this manner, holding up behind the disciplinary committees. As Harris (2004) observed, distributed leadership does not infer that the work of principals is not imperative, rather their primary part is to create a community where people's knowledge and aptitudes can be utilised for the advancement of the organisation. Practicing leadership by principals would mean, inter alia, creating an environment where individual teachers and teams, such as disciplinary committees as well as learners' skills are enhanced to reduce or dispose of fights among learners. Makhasane and Chikoko (2016: 7) observed that "without direction setting at the top of the organisation, change cannot occur further down". This paper argues that teachers and learners are unlikely to promote a fight-free environment if the principals fail to provide the necessary direction.

At times, learner fights reportedly happened at the classroom level because of the absence of sound leadership and management of some teachers in the two schools. Such teachers did not endeavour to move and persuade learners to abstain from fighting and resolve issues with tranquility. Similarly, the learners who saw and cheered contenders also showed an absence of leadership by

neglecting to urge the fighters to stop the fight. Leadership as a process of influence comes from numerous sources (Spillane, 2005), including teachers and learners.

The learners who watched and urged on the individuals who fought were purportedly influencing fighters to proceed. If they could encourage others to continue fighting, it is conceivable that they could control their peers to forgo fights. Harris (2004) contends that distributed leadership is characterised, inter alia, by creating a common culture where individual abilities and skills are used to improve the organisation. It may be argued that some learners had undiscovered capacities and aptitudes which could be utilised to diminish fights specifically, and violence in general.

CONCLUSION

Fighting among learners was a common type of violence in the two schools that the teachers struggled to resolve. The principals and teachers in the participating schools embraced a scope of corrective measures such as cautioning, suspension and expulsion to control or minimise learner fights. In essence, the focus of school managers and teachers appeared to be on reactive management of fights rather than providing leadership that would influence learners to avoid fighting and avoid encourage others to fight. However, the fights among learners seemed not to be declining. The researcher, therefore, concludes that there was a leadership void. If principals, teachers, and learners do not exercise leadership, fights among learners are likely to continue. It was worrying that in some instances weapons were used, as was the case at Mic high school where a learner died.

Acknowledgments

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