

# “Guns in schools: a closer look at accidental shootings”

Violence has become part of everyday life. As such, the content of the article makes a valuable contribution. A recent two-day conference held by the Human Rights Commission of South Africa in Cape Town placed the phenomenon of violence in our schools in the spotlight. The conference took the form of public hearings over the two-day period and the message was clear: violence in schools is a significant problem and its occurrence is on the increase. Such deliberations clearly emphasize the need for research, policies and guidelines.

Nearly everyone in our society today has been directly or indirectly affected by crime and violence in some way. It is common knowledge that South Africa has the highest crime rate among the developing nations, if not in fact among all the nations in the world. What is of great concern is the tendency for crime and violence to be 'sensationalised' by the media, especially the printed media. We know that the more 'striking' the headline, the more printed media sells. This tendency might result in instilling fear in society, limiting personal freedom and societal interaction.

It is clear from this article that there is still, as with many other topics worth studying and exploring scientifically, little and often very limited research available on the topic of violence, especially gun violence, in our schools. There also appears to be a lack of more in-depth exploration and investigation into areas such as experience and understanding of the 'phenomenon' under investigation in this article. Whilst, there is general agreement that violence, specifically in our schools, requires prevention, it will not be possible without explicating and narrating experience and in so doing forming an understanding of the phenomenon.

Similarly, one cannot view any phenomenon without exploration of its context or system of occurrence. If a learner brings a gun to school it cannot be viewed in isolation. When one looks to the 'roots' of such risk-taking behaviour, i.e. putting such risk-taking behaviour into context as well as, identifying, exploring and describing the system from which the learner's behaviour originates, that a fuller and richer understanding of the phenomenon develops. General Systems Theory specifically, as a major theory within the field of Psychology, is very valuable as a point of departure for any 'investigation' into a phenomenon such as gun violence in schools. According to this theory no behaviour or action by any person or 'system' can be viewed in isolation, i.e. no behaviour or action occurs without it being inter-related to other persons or 'systems'. Neither could any person be seen in isolation, rather, all people are inter-connected and part of larger systems and sub-systems. When researching the phenomenon of gun violence in schools it is of paramount importance that all 'systems' that are involved in the phenomenon be 'investigated' and 'explored'; the parental sub-system as part of the bigger family system, the family system as part of the bigger community system and so on. When any phenomenon is viewed from a Systems Theory perspective, more meaning is gained into its significance and mechanisms of working.

This 'emersion' into the phenomenon under investigation, in

this case gun violence in schools, might in fact also lead towards an understanding of the underlying circumstances giving rise to the phenomenon. This process may lead to more successful prevention strategies, as opposed to those strategies that are geared towards crisis intervention and containment that are often employed post-incident.

The article attempts to make a distinction between accidental and purposeful shootings. When any person takes a firearm along with him / her, the mere act in itself points towards intent, whether it is as simple as self-protection or more complex as revenge killing. This raises the question: if a person who is not the object of focus for the behaviour of the learner then gets shot by that learner carrying the firearm, is that shooting accidental? Rightfully so, the authors of the article state that this is debateable. The distinction between accidental and purposeful shootings is in reality not easily delineated. Assigning blame as to its occurrence is equally contentious. It is easy to get caught up in such issues, whilst losing sight of the fundamental concern: guns in schools.

The article cites issues related to gun violence in schools such as parental guidance and counselling, as well as the emotional status of those learners who carry firearms to school. It is especially the latter, and more specifically the fact that learners who do carry firearms to school often do so out of need (in terms of self-protection, ongoing victimization by school bullies, or a generalised poor self-image and underlying sense of insecurity) that is of significance, especially from a psychological perspective. Such issues need to be addressed in future research.

It might be argued that the responsibility for primary prevention and education does not lie with the school or the education environment, but rather at home and with the learners' parents and immediate familial surrounds. It is often the case with children that what they are shown by those whom they see as significant figures, they will attempt to repeat or replicate in other 'systems', contexts and environments.

Finally, as researchers and 'social commentators' we are often encouraged to 'limit' the scope of our enquiry so as to render such efforts more meaningful. The article succeeds in highlighting one aspect of a much larger and more serious issue, that of the escalating occurrence of violence in schools. Guns are only one means of 'perpetrating' violence at school. Physical violence, the use of knives and other 'instruments' and emotional abuse are also forms of school-based violence that occur daily and with increasing severity and frequency. They are not the focus of this article. The issue of violence in society as a whole, needs to be addressed and researched more extensively if one is to deal with the specific phenomenon of accidental/intentional gun violence in schools

**Franco P Visser**

Clinical Psychologist, Sterkfontein Hospital,  
email: 0836872054@mntnloaded.co.za