

## *Safe and sound? Violence and South African education*

### Overview

Concerns about school violence are increasing both locally and internationally (Hymel & Swearer 2015; Maphalala & Mabunda 2014). Perhaps this is why there has been an unprecedented surge in data on school safety in established education studies. Reporting on the findings of research into school violence based on the 2011 study of Grade 9 learners conducted by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Martin et al. 2012), this brief makes an argument for the expansion of policy efforts that ensure the safety of all learners at South African schools. The results show that violence in schools is considered to be more serious in South Africa than elsewhere. A clear link between the prevalence of school-related violence and high crime levels in communities was also found. Compared to public schools, independent schools were somewhat safer, but even in these schools, one in five learners reported being bullied on a weekly basis. The socio-economic status of learners was another important indicator for potential exposure to acts of violence, with the chances of being bullied regularly being higher for learners of a low socio-economic status. In line with international trends, there was a higher frequency of bullying for boys than for girls who attend schools with similar characteristics. Fee-paying and independent schools,

where both discipline and academic success are emphasised, were more academically successful. Schools where there were fewer discipline or safety problems achieved better results, but this relationship was dependent on the size of the school. The brief therefore recommends that policies to promote safe and drug-free schooling environments be closely monitored and periodically reviewed so that they remain relevant to the needs of schools and communities.

### Introduction

The issue of safety in schools has come under renewed scrutiny as a result of a number of high-profile episodes of violence that have been reported in the media (Mishna et al. 2012; Ncontsa & Shumba 2013). Concerns about lack of safety in South African schools are far-reaching, and violence in schools is often an extension of violence in communities. Existing safety concerns include bullying, homophobic bullying and sexual harassment; and new threats, such as cyberbullying, are growing rapidly. Children may be exposed to unsafe conditions – both at home and at school – from a very young age. Because children need to feel safe in order to achieve their full potential at school, experiences of violence or lack of safety can have a devastating impact on their ability to learn and to live healthy and productive lives (Nansel et al. 2003). Moreover, evidence is

emerging that early peer victimisation can have negative lifelong effects on individuals (McDougall & Vaillancourt 2015). Existing legislation to protect schoolchildren from the worst forms of physical violence is not always enforced. For example, the use of corporal punishment is forbidden under the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996), but it is still practised (Burton & Leoschut 2013).

According to the Children's Amendment Act (No. 41 of 2007), it is a legal requirement that cases of violence against schoolchildren be reported to law enforcement officials, but news of horrific incidents in schools continues to grab headlines. In some instances, teachers are the perpetrators of violent acts. Female learners are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment from male teachers (UNESCO 2015). But it is also possible for teachers to be victims of violence. The negative effect on teacher morale and the sense of helplessness that many teachers may feel can further damage the learning environment. The National School Safety Framework (DBE 2015) has been developed to specify the roles and responsibilities of school officials in ensuring safety in schools. The document has been designed with input from the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention and the South African Police Service. The framework also provides guidelines on how provinces and districts can monitor school safety

at a local level (DBE 2014). Along similar lines, the National Strategy for the Prevention and Management of Alcohol and Drug Use was developed to ensure that schools are drug-free. This strategy acknowledges that alcohol and drug abuse are social issues and requires extending support to families and communities (DBE 2013).

Given the negative impact that unsafe and violent schools have on educational delivery, this policy brief shares the results of recent research into school safety based on the 2011 TIMSS study of Grade 9 learners and schools. Included are findings on school safety in different schooling environments as well as comparisons of the extent of school safety problems locally and internationally. The analysis also shows which groups of learners are at greatest risk of being victims of school violence. Implications for policy are presented.

## Findings

### Concerns about school safety in South Africa are more serious than in other countries

The 2011 TIMSS study collected information from school principals, teachers and learners in 285 schools across the country. An index of school discipline and safety was created based on 11 questions posed to principals about the safety of their school environment. As shown in Table 1, South African school principals expressed greater worries about school safety than their international peers in over 60

countries that participated in the 2011 TIMSS study. Responses regarding the extent of school safety problems ranged from 'hardly any problems' (for schools with very few safety issues) to 'moderate problems' (the TIMSS study defines this group as having the most serious problems). Thirteen per cent of all international learners attended schools with moderate problems, whereas more than double that figure (29%) of South Africans attended schools with 'moderate' discipline and safety problems. Predictably, learners in safer schools tended to perform better in mathematics and science. It could be the case that the relationship flows in the opposite direction, and thus parents of higher achievers enrol their children in safer schools. It is also likely that learners with greater support systems outside of school may rely on adults to advocate for their safety at school.

### Provincial differences in school safety are related to levels of crime in communities

There is also a clear relationship between school-related violence and tolerance of crime levels in society. Provincial results from the 2012 National School Violence Survey (Burton & Leoschut 2013) were compared to the 2011 TIMSS study results<sup>1</sup> on the frequency of bullying in schools (see Figure 1). The TIMSS survey asked learners how frequently they were bullied at school. Different forms of

1 The survey asked respondents to reflect on events in the previous year, which coincided with the TIMSS study.

bullying were considered in the study design (including being made fun of, being left out of games and activities, having lies spread about them, having something stolen from them, being hit or hurt, being made to do things they did not want to do, having embarrassing information shared about them, and being threatened). Responses were combined to form a single bullying index.

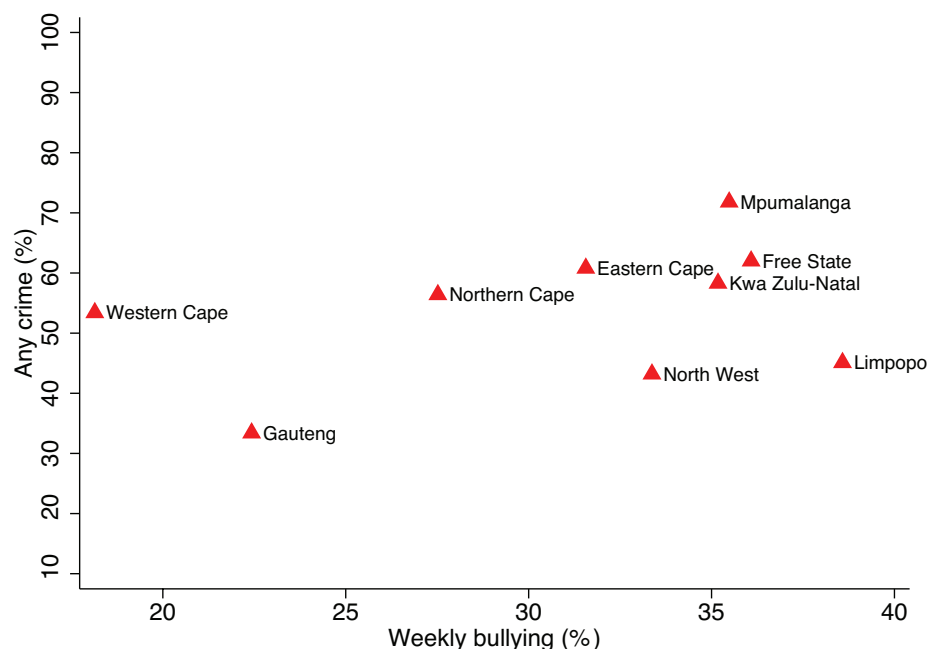
In over half of the country's provinces, more than 50% of learners had been exposed to some form of crime. In the North West, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, Mpumalanga and Limpopo, at least one-third of learners were victims of bullying on a weekly basis. On the whole, provinces where the threat of crime to learners was high also experienced high concentrations of bullying at schools. There were some exceptions, such as the Western Cape, where children were at relatively high risk of exposure to crime, but where reports of learners being bullied at school on a regular basis were lower than in other provinces. At the other extreme were estimates for Limpopo, where high reports of school victimisation were not linked to high levels of crime. These exceptions raise important questions about how to standardise the reporting of violence in schools and communities. However, these patterns also raise serious concerns about practical measures that can be used to improve the safety of schools in communities where gang violence and crime are widespread, and to prevent community tensions from filtering into schools.

**Table 1:** TIMSS mathematics and science achievement scores, by principals' perspective on school discipline and safety, 2011

|                         | School discipline and safety index |                          |                 |                          |                   |                          |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
|                         | Hardly any problems                |                          | Minor problems  |                          | Moderate problems |                          |
|                         | % learners (SE)*                   | Average achievement (SE) | % learners (SE) | Average achievement (SE) | % learners (SE)   | Average achievement (SE) |
| Mathematics (SA)        | 8 (2.1)                            | 367 (19.5)               | 63 (3.6)        | 355 (3.9)                | 29 (3.3)          | 338 (5.3)                |
| Mathematics (int. avg.) | 38 (0.5)                           | 478 (1.0)                | 49 (0.6)        | 463 (0.9)                | 13 (0.4)          | 434 (2.2)                |
| Science (SA)            | 8 (2.1)                            | 338 (28.1)               | 63 (3.6)        | 336 (6.1)                | 29 (3.3)          | 317 (7.2)                |
| Science (int. avg.)     | 38 (0.5)                           | 488 (1.0)                | 49 (0.6)        | 473 (0.9)                | 13 (0.4)          | 446 (2.2)                |

\*SE = standard error

**Figure 1:** Community violence and school safety, 2011



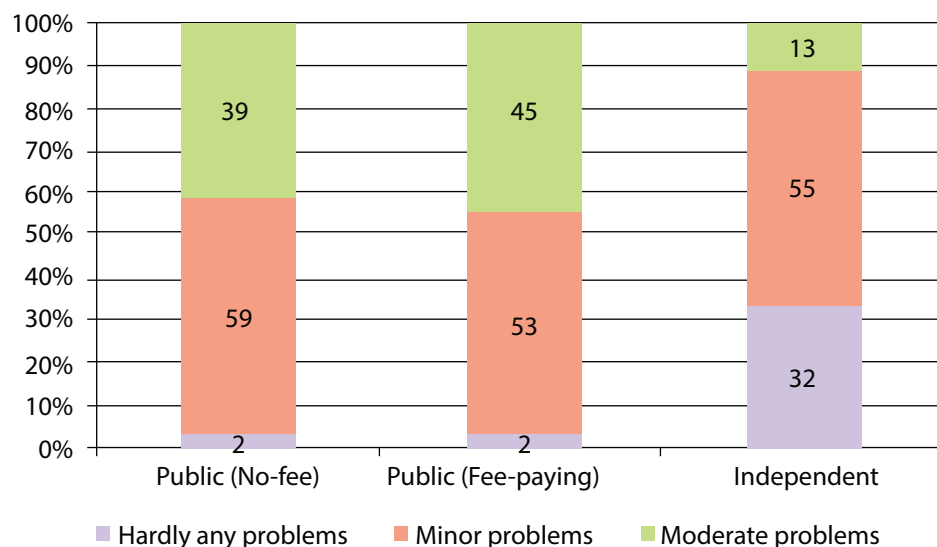
**Independent schools are somewhat safer, but bullying still happens**

Although the problem of school safety exists across South African schools, independent schools were viewed as safer than public schools, according to school principals. Principals of fee-paying and no-fee public schools had similar views about the nature of the problem of safety in their schools. In both types of schools (fee-paying and no-fee), the overwhelming majority of school principals (98%) reported that they had either ‘minor’ or ‘moderate’ problems with school safety (Figure 2). Only 2% of school principals in public schools stated that they had ‘hardly any problems’ with school safety. In contrast, about one-third of heads of independent schools reported that they had ‘hardly any problems’ with safety in their schools.

**The chances of being bullied regularly are higher for learners of lower socio-economic status**

Our analysis reveals some worrying trends about the victims of bullying within different educational environments. In line with other studies, the TIMSS study revealed that the chances of being bullied regularly were higher for boys than for girls. Overall, they were highest among boys and girls in no-fee schools, and lowest among girls in fee-paying and independent schools. A summary scale of socio-economic status (SES) was also created and included in the analysis (see Figure 3). The frequency of bullying for boys from low-SES households was quite alarming: the probability of weekly bullying was nearly 50% for the least wealthy boys in the least resourced schools. Learners of a similar SES in fee-paying public schools and in independent schools shared a very similar probability of being bullied. Although the likelihood of regular bullying was lower in these better-resourced schools, one-fifth of low-SES

**Figure 2:** Principals’ perspective on the percentage of learners affected by school discipline and safety conditions, by school type, 2011



learners attending independent schools were bullied on a weekly basis.

The link between social status and bullying within different types of schools (no-fee, fee-paying and independent) is worrying. Learners of a lower SES were more likely to be victims of bullying than learners of higher SES, even after taking into consideration other background factors such as age, gender and academic achievement. This implies that irrespective of whether resource-rich or resource-poor schools are considered, the most vulnerable learners appear to be those who arrive at school with the least private support relative to their peers. This suggests that status categories from outside of school are recycled within schools, leaving the most disadvantaged children consistently worse off.

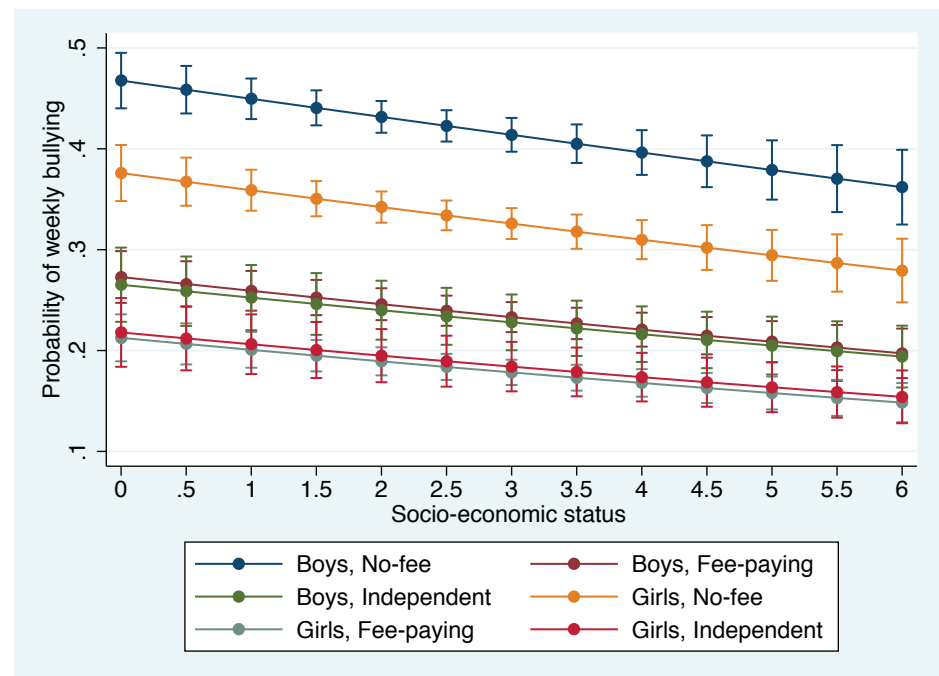
**Fee-paying and independent schools where both discipline and academic success are emphasised are more academically successful**

We compared the disciplinary and academic climate of schools with the level of achievement in TIMSS mathematics for the different schooling environments. In fee-paying public schools and independent schools, there was a strong positive association between greater discipline and higher average test scores. Even stronger was the relationship between emphasis on academic success and academic achievement. However, in no-fee public schools, this link did not exist. Further investigation is needed to determine other factors that could be influencing these patterns.

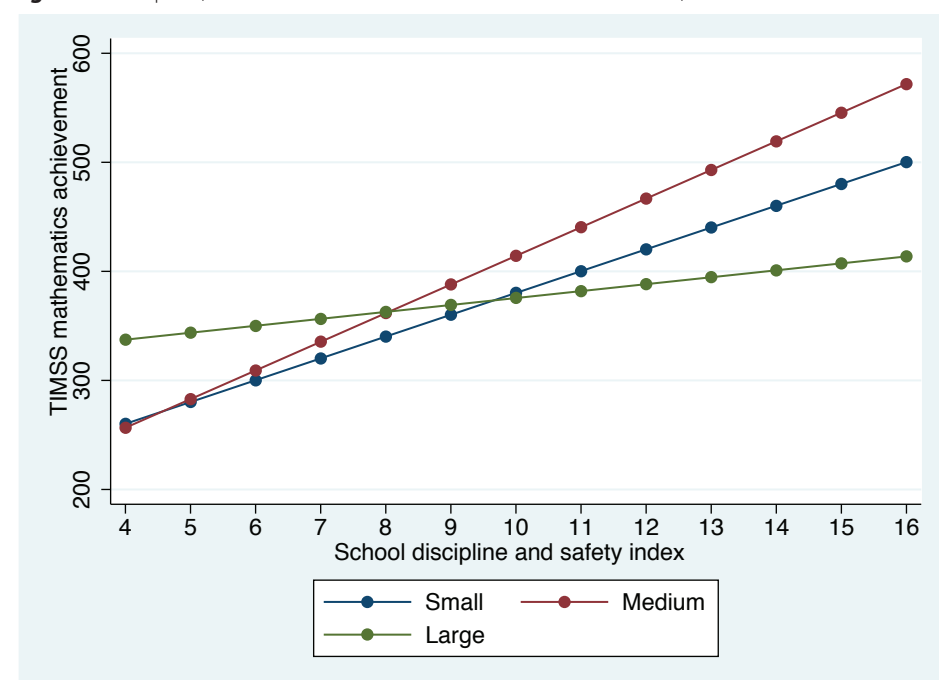
**Schools with fewer discipline and safety problems achieve better results, but this link is dependent on the size of the school**

Both the size of the school (based on enrolment) and the climate of discipline

**Figure 3:** Bullying, socio-economic status and school type, 2011



**Figure 4:** Discipline, school size and TIMSS mathematics achievement, 2011



were compared to academic results (see Figure 4). In small- and medium-sized schools, with average enrolment of 450 and 900 learners respectively, maintaining discipline had a positive relationship with higher test scores. However, in very large schools (with

average enrolment of over 1 400), the link between achievement and greater discipline was far weaker. This result suggests that the requirements for larger schools to ensure an orderly environment are possibly greater. Interestingly, among schools where

safety and discipline were poor, larger schools performed slightly better than smaller schools.

## Policy implications

1. The implementation of the National School Safety Framework provides an opportunity for schools, communities, law enforcement officials and the South African Council of Educators (SACE) to work towards clearly defined goals for school safety. Workshops on training personnel in the management of bullying in schools have been introduced in some provinces by the Department of Basic Education. The national department, along with development partners, needs to ensure that adequate resources are in place for the extension of these initiatives to all provinces. In addition, their impact should be monitored closely over time. In this way, school leaders and teachers can set the tone for a disciplined and safe school environment.
2. It is important that different role-players, including parents, governing board members, teachers, principals and learners, are aware of how threats of violence are managed and how victims and perpetrators of violence should be treated. Where teachers are convicted of abuse, the SACE, together with law enforcement officials, needs to ensure that these teachers are not recycled within the system.
3. Schools need to partner with parents and communities so that early signs of bullying are detected and addressed. Parents and community leaders should also be involved in information and awareness campaigns at schools.
4. Education departments and school management should be made aware of risk conditions (low SES, lack of focus on culture of learning and discipline, and unwieldy large

schools), and be mindful of what they could do in pursuit of reducing such risks, or at least increasing the chances of assisting victims.

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